

CHAPTER V

The morning was a brighter one than London usually indulges in and the sun made its way into Feather's bedroom to the revealing of its coral pink glow and comfort. She had always liked her bedroom and had usually wakened in it to the sense of luxuriousness it is possible a pet cat feels when it wakens to stretch itself on a cushion with its saucer of cream awaiting it.

But she did not awaken either to a sense of brightness or luxury this morning. She had slept it was true, but once or twice when the pillow had slipped aside she had found herself disturbed by the far-off sound of the wailing of some little animal which had caused her automatically and really scarcely consciously to replace the pillow. It had only happened at long intervals because it is Nature that an exhausted baby falls asleep when it is worn out. Robin had probably slept almost as much as her mother.

Feather staring at the pinkness around her reached at last, with the assistance of a certain physical consciousness, a sort of spiritless intention.

"She's asleep now," she murmured. "I hope she won't waken for a long time. I feel faint. I shall have to find something to eat--if it's only biscuits." Then she lay and tried to remember what Cook had said about her not starving. "She said there were a few things

left in the pantry and closets. Perhaps there's some condensed milk. How do you mix it up? If she cries I might go and give her some. It wouldn't be so awful now it's daylight."

She felt shaky when she got out of bed and stood on her feet. She had not had a maid in her girlhood so she could dress herself, much as she detested to do it. After she had begun however she could not help becoming rather interested because the dress she had worn the day before had become crushed and she put on a fresh one she had not worn at all. It was thin and soft also, and black was quite startlingly becoming to her. She would wear this one when Lord Coombe came, after she wrote to him. It was silly of her not to have written before though she knew he had left town after the funeral. Letters would be forwarded.

"It will be quite bright in the dining-room now," she said to encourage herself. "And Tonson once said that the only places the sun came into below stairs were the pantry and kitchen and it only stayed about an hour early in the morning. I must get there as soon as I can."

When she had so dressed herself that the reflection the mirror gave back to her was of the nature of a slight physical stimulant she opened her bedroom door and faced exploration of the deserted house below with a quaking sense of the proportions of the inevitable. She got down the narrow stairs casting a frightened

glance at the emptiness of the drawing-rooms which seemed to stare at her as she passed them. There was sun in the dining-room and when she opened the sideboard she found some wine in decanters and some biscuits and even a few nuts and some raisins and oranges. She put them on the table and sat down and ate some of them and began to feel a little less shaky.

If she had been allowed time to sit longer and digest and reflect she might have reached the point of deciding on what she would write to Lord Coombe. She had not the pen of a ready writer and it must be thought over. But just when she was beginning to be conscious of the pleasant warmth of the sun which shone on her shoulders from the window, she was almost startled out of her chair by hearing again stealing down the staircase from the upper regions that faint wail like a little cat's.

"Just the moment--the very MOMENT I begin to feel a little quieted--and try to think--she begins again!" she cried out. "It's worse than ANYTHING!"

Large crystal tears ran down her face and upon the polished table.

"I suppose she would starve to death if I didn't give her some food--and then I should be blamed! People would be horrid about it. I've got nothing to eat myself."

She must at any rate manage to stop the crying before she could write to Coombe. She would be obliged to go down into the pantry and look for some condensed milk. The creature had no teeth but perhaps she could mumble a biscuit or a few raisins. If she could be made to swallow a little port wine it might make her sleepy. The sun was paying its brief morning visit to the kitchen and pantry when she reached there, but a few cockroaches scuttled away before her and made her utter a hysterical little scream. But there WAS some condensed milk and there was a little warm water in a kettle because the fire was not quite out. She imperfectly mixed a decoction and filled a bottle which ought not to have been downstairs but had been brought and left there by Louisa as a result of tender moments with Edward.

When she put the bottle and some biscuits and scraps of cold ham on a tray because she could not carry them all in her hands, her sense of outrage and despair made her almost sob.

"I am just like a servant--carrying trays upstairs," she wept.

"I--I might be Edward--or--or Louisa." And her woe increased when she added in the dining-room the port wine and nuts and raisins and macaroons as viands which MIGHT somehow add to infant diet and induce sleep. She was not sure of course--but she knew they sucked things and liked sweets.

A baby left unattended to scream itself to sleep and awakening

to scream itself to sleep again, does not present to a resentful observer the flowerlike bloom and beauty of infancy. When Feather carried her tray into the Night Nursery and found herself confronting the disordered crib on which her offspring lay she felt the child horrible to look at. Its face was disfigured and its eyes almost closed. She trembled all over as she put the bottle to its mouth and saw the fiercely hungry clutch of its hands. It was old enough to clutch, and clutch it did, and suck furiously and starvingly--even though actually forced to stop once or twice at first to give vent to a thwarted remnant of a scream.

Feather had only seen it as downy whiteness and perfume in Louisa's arms or in its carriage. It had been a singularly vivid and brilliant-eyed baby at whom people looked as they passed.

"Who will give her a bath?" wailed Feather. "Who will change her clothes? Someone must! Could a woman by the day do it? Cook said I could get a woman by the day."

And then she remembered that one got servants from agencies. And where were the agencies? And even a woman "by the day" would demand wages and food to eat.

And then the front door bell rang.

What could she do--what could she do? Go downstairs and open the

door herself and let everyone know! Let the ringer go on ringing until he was tired and went away? She was indeed hard driven, even though the wail had ceased as Robin clutched her bottle to her breast and fed with frenzy. Let them go away--let them! And then came the wild thought that it might be Something--the Something which must happen when things were at their worst! And if it had come and the house seemed to be empty! She did not walk down the stairs, she ran. Her heart beat until she reached the door out of breath and when she opened it stood their panting.

The people who waited upon the steps were strangers. They were very nice looking and quite young--a man and a woman very perfectly dressed. The man took a piece of paper out of his pocketbook and handed it to her with an agreeable apologetic courtesy.

"I hope we have not called early enough to disturb you," he said.

"We waited until eleven but we are obliged to catch a train at half past. It is an 'order to view' from Carson & Bayle." He added this because Feather was staring at the paper.

Carson & Bayle were the agents they had rented the house from. It was Carson & Bayle's collector Robert had met on the threshold and sworn at two days before he had been taken ill. They were letting the house over her head and she would be turned out into the street?

The young man and woman finding themselves gazing at this exquisitely pretty creature in exquisite mourning, felt themselves appallingly embarrassed. She was plainly the widow Carson had spoken of. But why did she open the door herself? And why did she look as if she did not understand? Indignation against Carson & Bayle began to stir the young man.

"Beg pardon! So sorry! I am afraid we ought not to have come," he protested. "Agents ought to know better. They said you were giving up the house at once and we were afraid someone might take it."

Feather held the "order to view" in her hand and snared at them quite helplessly.

"There--are no--no servants to show it to you," she said. "If you could wait--a few days--perhaps--"

She was so lovely and Madame Helene's filmy black creation was in itself such an appeal, that the amiable young strangers gave up at once.

"Oh, certainly--certainly! Do excuse us! Carson and Bayle ought not to have--! We are so sorry. Good morning, GOOD morning," they gave forth in discomfited sympathy and politeness, and really quite scurried away.

Having shut the door on their retreat Feather stood shivering.

"I am going to be turned out of the house! I shall have to live in the street!" she thought. "Where shall I keep my clothes if I live in the street!"

Even she knew that she was thinking idiotically. Of course if everything was taken from you and sold, you would have no clothes at all, and wardrobes and drawers and closets would not matter. The realization that scarcely anything in the house had been paid for came home to her with a ghastly shock. She staggered upstairs to the first drawing-room in which there was a silly pretty little buhl writing table.

She felt even more senseless when she sank into a chair before it and drew a sheet of note-paper towards her. Her thoughts would not connect themselves with each other and she could not imagine what she ought to say in her letter to Coombe. In fact she seemed to have no thoughts at all. She could only remember the things which had happened, and she actually found she could write nothing else. There seemed nothing else in the world.

"Dear Lord Coombe," trailed tremulously over the page--"The house is quite empty. The servants have gone away. I have no money. And there is not any food. And I am going to be turned out into the street--and the baby is crying because it is hungry."

She stopped there, knowing it was not what she ought to say. And as she stopped and looked at the words she began herself to wail somewhat as Robin had wailed in the dark when she would not listen or go to her. It was like a beggar's letter--a beggar's! Telling him that she had no money and no food--and would be turned out for unpaid rent. And that the baby was crying because it was starving!

"It's a beggar's letter--just a beggar's," she cried out aloud to the empty room. "And it's true!" Robin's wail itself had not been more hopeless than hers was as she dropped her head and let it lie on the buhl table.

She was not however even to be allowed to let it lie there, for the next instant there fell on her startled ear quite echoing through the house another ring at the doorbell and two steely raps on the smart brass knocker. It was merely because she did not know what else to do, having just lost her wits entirely that she got up and trailed down the staircase again.

When she opened the door, Lord Coombe--the apotheosis of exquisite fitness in form and perfect appointment as also of perfect expression--was standing on the threshold.