

## CHAPTER XI

"The child's always been well, ma'am," Andrews was standing, the image of exact correctness, in her mistress' bedroom, while Feather lay in bed with her breakfast on a convenient and decorative little table. "It's been a thing I've prided myself on. But I should say she isn't well now."

"Well, I suppose it's only natural that she should begin sometime," remarked Feather. "They always do, of course. I remember we all had things when we were children. What does the doctor say? I hope it isn't the measles, or the beginning of anything worse?"

"No, ma'am, it isn't. It's nothing like a child's disease. I could have managed that. There's good private nursing homes for them in these days. Everything taken care of exactly as it should be and no trouble of disinfecting and isolating for the family. I know what you'd have wished to have done, ma'am."

"You do know your business, Andrews," was Feather's amiable comment.

"Thank you, ma'am," from Andrews. "Infectious things are easy managed if they're taken away quick. But the doctor said you must be spoken to because perhaps a change was needed."

"You could take her to Ramsgate or somewhere bracing," said Feather.

"But what did he SAY?"

"He seemed puzzled, ma'am. That's what struck me. When I told him about her not eating--and lying awake crying all night--to judge from her looks in the morning--and getting thin and pale--he examined her very careful and he looked queer and he said, 'This child hasn't had a SHOCK of any kind, has she? This looks like what we should call shock--if she were older'."

Feather laughed.

"How could a baby like that have a shock?"

"That's what I thought myself, ma'am," answered Andrews. "A child that's had her hours regular and is fed and bathed and sleeps by the clock, and goes out and plays by herself in the Gardens, well watched over, hasn't any chance to get shocks. I told him so and he sat still and watched her quite curious, and then he said very slow: 'Sometimes little children are a good deal shaken up by a fall when they are playing. Do you remember any chance fall when she cried a good deal?'"

"But you didn't, of course," said Feather.

"No, ma'am, I didn't. I keep my eye on her pretty strict and shouldn't encourage wild running or playing. I don't let her play

with other children. And she's not one of those stumbling, falling children. I told him the only fall I ever knew of her having was a bit of a slip on a soft flower bed that had just been watered--to judge from the state her clothes were in. She had cried because she's not used to such things, and I think she was frightened. But there wasn't a scratch or a shadow of a bruise on her. Even that wouldn't have happened if I'd been with her. It was when I was ill and my sister Anne took my place. Ann thought at first that she'd been playing with a little boy she had made friends with--but she found out that the boy hadn't come that morning--"

"A boy!" Andrews was sharp enough to detect a new and interested note. "What boy?"

"She wouldn't have played with any other child if I'd been there" said Andrews, "I was pretty sharp with Anne about it. But she said he was an aristocratic looking little fellow--"

"Was he in Highland costume?" Feather interrupted.

"Yes, ma'am. Anne excused herself by saying she thought you must know something about him. She declares she saw you come into the Gardens and speak to his Mother quite friendly. That was the day before Robin fell and ruined her rose-coloured smock and things. But it wasn't through playing boisterous with the boy--because he didn't come that morning, as I said, and he never has since."

Andrews, on this, found cause for being momentarily puzzled by the change of expression in her mistress' face. Was it an odd little gleam of angry spite she saw?

"And never has since, has he?" Mrs. Gareth-Lawless said with a half laugh.

"Not once, ma'am," answered Andrews. "And Anne thinks it queer the child never seemed to look for him. As if she'd lost interest. She just droops and drags about and doesn't try to play at all."

"How much did she play with him?"

"Well, he was such a fine little fellow and had such a respectable, elderly, Scotch looking woman in charge of him that Anne owned up that she hadn't thought there was any objections to them playing together. She says they were as well behaved and quiet as children could be." Andrews thought proper to further justify herself by repeating, "She didn't think there could be any objection."

"There couldn't," Mrs. Gareth-Lawless remarked. "I do know the boy. He is a relation of Lord Coombe's."

"Indeed, ma'am," with colourless civility, "Anne said he was a big handsome child."

Feather took a small bunch of hothouse grapes from her breakfast tray and, after picking one off, suddenly began to laugh.

"Good gracious, Andrews!" she said. "He was the 'shock'! How perfectly ridiculous! Robin had never played with a boy before and she fell in love with him. The little thing's actually pining away for him." She dropped the grapes and gave herself up to delicate mirth. "He was taken away and disappeared. Perhaps she fainted and fell into the wet flower bed and spoiled her frock, when she first realized that he wasn't coming."

"It did happen that morning," admitted Andrews, smiling a little also. "It does seem funny. But children take to each other in a queer way now and then. I've seen it upset them dreadful when they were parted."

"You must tell the doctor," laughed Feather. "Then he'll see there's nothing to be anxious about. She'll get over it in a week."

"It's five weeks since it happened, ma'am," remarked Andrews, with just a touch of seriousness.

"Five! Why, so it must be! I remember the day I spoke to Mrs. Muir. If she's that sort of child you had better keep her away from boys. HOW ridiculous! How Lord Coombe--how people will laugh when

I tell them!"

She had paused a second because--for that second--she was not quite sure that Coombe WOULD laugh. Frequently she was of the opinion that he did not laugh at things when he should have done so. But she had had a brief furious moment when she had realized that the boy had actually been whisked away. She remembered the clearness of the fine eyes which had looked directly into hers. The woman had been deciding then that she would have nothing to do with her--or even with her child.

But the story of Robin worn by a bereft nursery passion for a little boy, whose mamma snatched him away as a brand from the burning, was far too edifying not to be related to those who would find it delicious.

It was on the occasion, a night or so later, of a gathering at dinner of exactly the few elect ones, whose power to find it delicious was the most highly developed, that she related it. It was a very little dinner--only four people. One was the long thin young man, with the good looking narrow face and dark eyes peering through a pince nez--the one who had said that Mrs. Gareth-Lawless "got her wondrous clothes from Helene" but that he couldn't. His name was Harrowby. Another was the Starling who was a Miss March who had, some years earlier, led the van of the girls who prostrated their relatives by becoming what was then called "emancipated"; the

sign thereof being the demanding of latchkeys and the setting up of bachelor apartments. The relatives had astonishingly settled down, with the unmoved passage of time, and more modern emancipation had so far left latchkeys and bachelor apartments behind it that they began to seem almost old-fogeyish. Clara March, however, had progressed with her day. The third diner was an adored young actor with a low, veiled voice which, combining itself with almond eyes and a sentimental and emotional curve of cheek and chin, made the most commonplace "lines" sound yearningly impassioned. He was not impassioned at all--merely fond of his pleasures and comforts in a way which would end by his becoming stout. At present his figure was perfect--exactly the thing for the uniforms of royal persons of Ruritania and places of that ilk--and the name by which programmes presented him was Gerald Vesey.

Feather's house pleased him and she herself liked being spoken to in the veiled voice and gazed at by the almond eyes, as though insuperable obstacles alone prevented soul-stirring things from being said. That she knew this was not true did not interfere with her liking it. Besides he adored and understood her clothes.

Over coffee in the drawing-room, Coombe joined them. He had not known of the little dinner and arrived just as Feather was on the point of beginning her story.

"You are just in time," she greeted him, "I was going to tell them

something to make them laugh."

"Will it make me laugh?" he inquired.

"It ought to. Robin is in love. She is five years old and she has been deserted, and Andrews came to tell me that she can neither eat nor sleep. The doctor says she has had a shock."

Coombe did not join in the ripple of amused laughter but, as he took his cup of coffee, he looked interested.

Harrowby was interested too. His dark eyes quite gleamed.

"I suppose she is in bed by now," he said. "If it were not so late, I should beg you to have her brought down so that we might have a look at her. I'm by way of taking a psychological interest."

"I'm psychological myself," said the Starling. "But what do you mean, Feather? Are you in earnest?"

"Andrews is," Feather answered. "She could manage measles but she could not be responsible for shock. But she didn't find out about the love affair. I found that out--by mere chance. Do you remember the day we got out of the victoria and went into the Gardens, Starling?"



"The time you spoke to Mrs. Muir?"

Coombe turned slightly towards them.

Feather nodded, with a lightly significant air.

"It was her boy," she said, and then she laughed and nodded at Coombe.

"He was quite as handsome as you said he was. No wonder poor Robin fell prostrate. He ought to be chained and muzzled by law when he grows up."

"But so ought Robin," threw in the Starling in her brusque, young mannish way.

"But Robin's only a girl and she's not a parti," laughed Feather.

Her eyes, lifted to Coombe's, held a sort of childlike malice.

"After his mother knew she was Miss Gareth-Lawless, he was not allowed to play in the Gardens again. Did she take him back to Scotland?"

"They went back to Scotland," answered Coombe, "and, of course, the boy was not left behind."

"Have YOU a child five years old?" asked Vesey in his low voice

of Feather. "You?"

"It seems absurd to ME," said Feather, "I never quite believe in her."

"I don't," said Vesey. "She's impossible."

"Robin is a stimulating name," put in Harrowby. "IS it too late to let us see her? If she's such a beauty as Starling hints, she ought to be looked at."

Feather actually touched the bell by the fireplace. A sudden caprice moved her. The love story had not gone off quite as well as she had thought it would. And, after all, the child was pretty enough to show off. She knew nothing in particular about her daughter's hours, but, if she was asleep, she could be wakened.

"Tell Andrews," she said to the footman when he appeared, "I wish Miss Robin to be brought downstairs."

"They usually go to bed at seven, I believe," remarked Coombe, "but, of course, I am not an authority."

Robin was not asleep though she had long been in bed. Because she kept her eyes shut Andrews had been deceived into carrying on a conversation with her sister Anne, who had come to see her. Robin

had been lying listening to it. She had begun to listen because they had been talking about the day she had spoiled her rose-coloured smock and they had ended by being very frank about other things.

"As sure as you saw her speak to the boy's mother the day before, just so sure she whisked him back to Scotland the next morning," said Andrews. "She's one of the kind that's particular. Lord Coombe's the reason. She does not want her boy to see or speak to him, if it can be helped. She won't have it--and when she found out--"

"Is Lord Coombe as bad as they say?" put in Anne with bated breath.

"He must be pretty bad if a boy that's eight years old has to be kept out of sight and sound of him."

So it was Lord Coombe who had somehow done it. He had made Donal's mother take him away. It was Lord Coombe. Who was Lord Coombe? It was because he was wicked that Donal's mother would not let him play with her--because he was wicked. All at once there came to her a memory of having heard his name before. She had heard it several times in the basement Servants' Hall and, though she had not understood what was said about him, she had felt the atmosphere of cynical disapproval of something. They had said "him" and "her" as if he somehow belonged to the house. On one occasion he had been "high" in the manner of some reproof to Jennings, who, being enraged, freely expressed his opinions of his lordship's character

and general reputation. The impression made on Robin then had been that he was a person to be condemned severely. That the condemnation was the mere outcome of the temper of an impudent young footman had not conveyed itself to her, and it was the impression which came back to her now with a new significance. He was the cause--not Donal, not Donal's Mother--but this man who was so bad that servants were angry because he was somehow connected with the house.

"As to his badness," she heard Andrews answer, "there's some that can't say enough against him. Badness is smart these days. He's bad enough for the boy's mother to take him away from. It's what he is in this house that does it. She won't have her boy playing with a child like Robin."

Then--even as there flashed upon her bewilderment this strange revelation of her own unfitness for association with boys whose mothers took care of them--Jennings, the young footman, came to the door.

"Is she awake, Miss Andrews?" he said, looking greatly edified by Andrews' astonished countenance.

"What on earth--?" began Andrews.

"If she is," Jennings winked humorously, "she's to be dressed up and taken down to the drawing-room to be shown off. I don't know

whether it's Coombe's idea or not. He's there."

Robin's eyes flew wide open. She forgot to keep them shut. She was to go downstairs! Who wanted her--who?

Andrews had quite gasped.

"Here's a new break out!" she exclaimed. "I never heard such a thing in my life. She's been in bed over two hours. I'd like to know--"

She paused here because her glance at the bed met the dark liquidity of eyes wide open. She got up and walked across the room.

"You are awake!" she said. "You look as if you hadn't been asleep at all. You're to get up and have your frock put on. The Lady Downstairs wants you in the drawing-room."

Two months earlier such a piece of information would have awakened in the child a delirium of delight. But now her vitality was lowered because her previously unawakened little soul had soared so high and been so dashed down to cruel earth again. The brilliancy of the Lady Downstairs had been dimmed as a candle is dimmed by the light of the sun.

She felt only a vague wonder as she did as Andrews told her--wonder

at the strangeness of getting up to be dressed, as it seemed to her, in the middle of the night.

"It's just the kind of thing that would happen in a house like this," grumbled Andrews, as she put on her frock. "Just anything that comes into their heads they think they've a right to do. I suppose they have, too. If you're rich and aristocratic enough to have your own way, why not take it? I would myself."

The big silk curls, all in a heap, fell almost to the child's hips. The frock Andrews chose for her was a fairy thing.

"She IS a bit thin, to be sure," said the girl Anne. "But it points her little face and makes her eyes look bigger."

"If her mother's got a Marquis, I wonder what she'll get," said Andrews. "She's got a lot before her: this one!"

When the child entered the drawing-room, Andrews made her go in alone, while she held herself, properly, a few paces back like a lady in waiting. The room was brilliantly lighted and seemed full of colour and people who were laughing. There were pretty things crowding each other everywhere, and there were flowers on all sides. The Lady Downstairs, in a sheathlike sparkling dress, and only a glittering strap seeming to hold it on over her fair undressed shoulders, was talking to a tall thin man standing before the

fireplace with a gold cup of coffee in his hand.

As the little thing strayed in, with her rather rigid attendant behind her, suddenly the laughing ceased and everybody involuntarily drew a half startled breath--everybody but the tall thin man, who quietly turned and set his coffee cup down on the mantel piece behind him.

"Is THIS what you have been keeping up your sleeve!" said Harrowby, settling his pince nez.

"I told you!" said the Starling.

"You couldn't tell us," Vesey's veiled voice dropped in softly.

"It must be seen to be believed. But still--" aside to Feather,

"I don't believe it."

"Enter, my only child!" said Feather. "Come here, Robin. Come to your mother."

Now was the time! Robin went to her and took hold of a very small piece of her sparkling dress.

"ARE you my Mother?" she said. And then everybody burst into a peal of laughter, Feather with the rest.

"She calls me the Lady Downstairs," she said. "I really believe she doesn't know. She's rather a stupid little thing."

"Amazing lack of filial affection," said Lord Coombe.

He was not laughing like the rest and he was looking down at Robin. She thought him ugly and wicked looking. Vesey and Harrowby were beautiful by contrast. Before she knew who he was, she disliked him. She looked at him askance under her eyelashes, and he saw her do it before her mother spoke his name, taking her by the tips of her fingers and leading her to him.

"Come and let Lord Coombe look at you," she said. So it revealed itself to her that it was he--this ugly one--who had done it, and hatred surged up in her soul. It was actually in the eyes she raised to his face, and Coombe saw it as he had seen the sidelong glance and he wondered what it meant.

"Shake hands with Lord Coombe," Feather instructed.

"If you can make a curtsy, make one." She turned her head over her shoulders, "Have you taught her to curtsy, Andrews?"

But Andrews had not and secretly lost temper at finding herself made to figure as a nurse who had been capable of omission. Outwardly she preserved rigid calm.



"I'm afraid not, ma'am. I will at once, if you wish it."

Coombe was watching the inner abhorrence in the little face. Robin had put her hand behind her back--she who had never disobeyed since she was born! She had crossed a line of development when she had seen glimpses of the new world through Donal's eyes.

"What are you doing, you silly little thing," Feather reproved her. "Shake hands with Lord Coombe."

Robin shook her head fiercely.

"No! No! No! No!" she protested.

Feather was disgusted. This was not the kind of child to display.

"Rude little thing! Andrews, come and make her do it--or take her upstairs," she said.

Coombe took his gold coffee cup from the mantel.

"She regards me with marked antipathy, as she did when she first saw me," he summed the matter up. "Children and animals don't hate one without reason. It is some remote iniquity in my character which the rest of us have not yet detected." To Robin he said,

"I do not want to shake hands with you if you object. I prefer to drink my coffee out of this beautiful cup."

But Andrews was seething. Having no conscience whatever, she had instead the pride of a female devil in her perfection in her professional duties. That the child she was responsible for should stamp her with ignominious fourth-ratedness by conducting herself with as small grace as an infant costermonger was more than her special order of flesh and blood could bear-and yet she must outwardly control the flesh and blood.

In obedience to her mistress' command, she crossed the room and bent down and whispered to Robin. She intended that her countenance should remain non-committal, but, when she lifted her head, she met Coombe's eyes and realized that perhaps it had not. She added to her whisper nursery instructions in a voice of sugar.

"Be pretty mannered, Miss Robin, my dear, and shake hands with his lordship."

Each person in the little drawing-room saw the queer flame in the child-face--Coombe himself was fantastically struck by the sudden thought that its expression might have been that of an obstinate young martyr staring at the stake. Robin shrilled out her words:

"Andrews will pinch me--Andrews will pinch me! But--No!--No!" and

she kept her hand behind her back.

"Oh, Miss Robin, you naughty child!" cried Andrews, with pathos.

"Your poor Andrews that takes such care of you!"

"Horrid little thing!" Feather pettishly exclaimed. "Take her upstairs, Andrews. She shall not come down again."

Harrowby, settling his pince nez a little excitedly in the spurred novelty of his interest, murmured,

"If she doesn't want to go, she will begin to shriek. This looks as if she were a little termagant."

But she did not shriek when Andrews led her towards the door.

The ugly one with the wicked face was the one who had done it. He filled her with horror. To have touched him would have been like touching some wild beast of prey. That was all. She went with Andrews quite quietly.

"Will you shake hands with me?" said the Starling, goodnaturedly, as she passed, "I hope she won't snub me," she dropped aside to Harrowby.

Robin put out her hand prettily.

"Shake mine," suggested Harrowby, and she obeyed him.

"And mine?" smiled Vesey, with his best allure. She gave him her hand, and, as a result of the allure probably, a tiny smile flickered about the corners of her mouth. He did not look wicked.

"I remain an outcast," remarked Coombe, as the door closed behind the little figure.

"I detest an ill-mannered child," said Feather. "She ought to be slapped. We used to be slapped if we were rude."

"She said Andrews would pinch her. Is pinching the customary discipline?"

"It ought to be. She deserves it." Feather was quite out of temper.

"But Andrews is too good to her. She is a perfect creature and conducts herself like a clock. There has never been the slightest trouble in the Nursery. You see how the child looks--though her face ISN'T quite as round as it was." She laughed disagreeably and shrugged her white undressed shoulders. "I think it's a little horrid, myself--a child of that age fretting herself thin about a boy."