

## CHAPTER XII

But though she had made no protest on being taken out of the drawing-room, Robin had known that what Andrews' soft-sounding whisper had promised would take place when she reached the Nursery. She was too young to feel more than terror which had no defense whatever. She had no more defense against Andrews than she had had against the man who had robbed her of Donal. They were both big and powerful, and she was nothing. But, out of the wonders she had begun to know, there had risen in her before almost inert little being a certain stirring. For a brief period she had learned happiness and love and woe, and, this evening, inchoate rebellion against an enemy. Andrews led by the hand up the narrow, top-story staircase something she had never led before. She was quite unaware of this and, as she mounted each step, her temper mounted also, and it was the temper of an incensed personal vanity abnormally strong in this particular woman. When they were inside the Nursery and the door was shut, she led Robin to the middle of the small and gloomy room and released her hand.

"Now, my lady," she said. "I'm going to pay you out for disgracing me before everybody in the drawing-room." She had taken the child below stairs for a few minutes before bringing her up for the night. She had stopped in the kitchen for something she wanted for herself. She laid her belongings on a chest of drawers and turned about.

"I'm going to teach you a lesson you won't forget," she said.

What happened next turned the woman quite sick with the shock of amazement. The child had, in the past, been a soft puppet. She had been automatic obedience and gentleness. Privately Andrews had somewhat looked down on her lack of spirit, though it had been her own best asset. The outbreak downstairs had been an abnormality.

And now she stood before her with hands clenched, her little face wild with defiant rage.

"I'll scream! I'll scream! I'll SCREAM!" she shrieked. Andrews actually heard herself gulp; but she sprang up and forward.

"You'll SCREAM!" she could scarcely believe her own feelings--not to mention the evidence of her ears, "YOU'LL scream!"

The next instant was more astonishing still. Robin threw herself on her knees and scrambled like a cat. She was under the bed and in the remotest corner against the wall. She was actually unreachable, and she lay on her back kicking madly, hammering her heels against the floor and uttering piercing shrieks. As something had seemed to let itself go when she writhed under the bushes in the Gardens, so did something let go now. In her overstrung little mind there ruled for this moment the feeling that if she was to be pinched,

she would be pinched for a reason.

Andrews knelt by the side of the bed. She had a long, strong, thin arm and it darted beneath and clutched. But it was not long enough to attain the corner where the kicking and screaming was going on. Her temper became fury before her impotence and her hideous realization of being made ridiculous by this baby of six. Two floors below the afterglow of the little dinner was going on. Suppose even far echoes of the screams should be heard and make her more ridiculous still. She knew how they would laugh and her mistress would make some silly joke about Robin's being too much for her. Her fury rose so high that she had barely sense to realize that she must not let herself go too far when she got hold of the child. Get hold of her she would and pay her out--My word! She would pay her out!

"You little devil!" she said between her teeth, "Wait till I get hold of you." And Robin shrieked and hammered more insanely still.

The bed was rather a low one and it was difficult for any one larger than a child to find room beneath it. The correct and naturally rigid Andrews lay flat upon her stomach and wriggled herself partly under the edge. Just far enough for her long and strong arm, and equally long and strong clutching fingers to do their work. In her present state of mind, Andrews would have broken her back rather than not have reached the creature who so defied her. The strong

fingers clenched a flying petticoat and dragged at it fiercely--the next moment they clutched a frantic foot, with a power which could not be broken away from. A jerk and a remorseless dragging over the carpet and Robin was out of the protecting darkness and in the gas light again, lying tumbled and in an untidy, torn little heap on the nursery floor. Andrews was panting, but she did not loose her hold as she scrambled, without a rag of professional dignity, to her feet.

"My word!" she breathlessly gave forth. "I've got you now! I've got you now."

She so looked that to Robin she seemed--like the ugly man downstairs--a sort of wicked wild beast, whose mere touch would have been horror even if it did not hurt. And the child knew what was coming. She felt herself dragged up from the floor and also dragged between Andrew's knees, which felt bony and hard as iron. There was no getting away from them. Andrews had seated herself firmly on a chair.

Holding her between the iron knees, she put her large hand over her mouth. It was a hand large enough to cover more than her mouth. Only the panic-stricken eyes seemed to flare wide and lustrous above it.

"YOU'LL scream!" she said, "YOU'LL hammer on the floor with your

heels! YOU'LL behave like a wildcat--you that's been like a kitten! You've never done it before and you'll never do it again! If it takes me three days, I'll make you remember!"

And then her hand dropped--and her jaw dropped, and she sat staring with a furious, sick, white face at the open door--which she had shut as she came in. The top floor had always been so safe. The Nursery had been her own autocratic domain. There had been no human creature to whom it would have occurred to interfere. That was it. She had been actually SAFE.

Unheard in the midst of the struggle, the door had been opened without a knock. There on the threshold, as stiff as a ramrod, and with his hateful eyes uncovering their gleam, Lord Coombe was standing--no other than Lord Coombe.

Having a sharp working knowledge of her world, Andrews knew that it was all up. He had come upstairs deliberately. She knew what he had come for. He was as clever as he was bad, and he had seen something when he glanced at her in the drawing-room. Now he had heard and seen her as she dragged Robin from under the bed. He'd come up for that--for some queer evil reason of his own. The promptings of a remote gutter training made her feel a desire to use language such as she still had wisdom enough to restrain.

"You are a very great fool, young woman," he said. "You have

nothing but your character as a nurse to live on. A scene in a police court would ruin you. There is a Society which interferes with nursery torture."

Robin, freed from the iron grasp, had slunk behind a chair. He was there again.

Andrews' body, automatically responsive to rule and habit, rose from its seat and stood before this member of a class which required an upright position. She knew better than to attempt to excuse or explain. She had heard about the Society and she knew publicity would spell ruin and starvation. She had got herself into an appalling mess. Being caught--there you were. But that this evil-reputationed swell should actually have been awakened by some whim to notice and follow her up was "past her," as she would have put it.

"You were going to pinch her--by instalments, I suppose," he said. "You inferred that it might last three days. When she said you would--in the drawing-room--it occurred to me to look into it. What are your wages?"

"Thirty pounds a year, my lord."

"Go tomorrow morning to Benby, who engaged you for Mrs. Gareth-Lawless. He will be at his office by nine and will pay you what is owed to you--and a month's wages in lieu of notice."

"The mistress--" began Andrews.

"I have spoken to Mrs. Gareth-Lawless." It was a lie, serenely told. Feather was doing a new skirt dance in the drawing-room.

"She is engaged. Pack your box. Jennings will call a cab."

It was the utter idiotic hopelessness of saying anything to him which finished her. You might as well talk to a front door or a street lamp. Any silly thing you might try wouldn't even reach his ears. He had no ears for you. You didn't matter enough.

"Shall I leave her here--as she is?" she said, denoting Robin.

"Undress her and put her to bed before you pack your box," absolutely certain, fine cold modulations in the voice, which stood for his special plane of breeding, had their effect on her grovelling though raging soul. He was so exactly what he was and what she was not and could never attain. "I will stay here while you do it. Then go."

No vocabulary of the Servants' Hall could have encompassed the fine phrase grand seigneur, but, when Mrs. Blayne and the rest talked of him in their least resentful and more amiable moods, they unconsciously made efforts to express the quality in him which these two words convey. He had ways of his own. Men that paid a

pretty woman's bills and kept her going in luxury, Jennings and Mrs. Blayne and the others knew something about. They sometimes began well enough but, as time went on, they forgot themselves and got into the way of being familiar and showing they realized that they paid for things and had their rights. Most of them began to be almost like husbands--speak slighting and sharp and be a bit stiff about accounts--even before servants. They ran in and out or--after a while--began to stay away and not show up for weeks. "He" was different--so different that it was queer. Queer it certainly was that he really came to the place very seldom. Wherever they met, it didn't noticeably often happen in the slice of a house. He came as if he were a visitor. He took no liberties. Everything was punctiliously referred to Mrs. Gareth-Lawless. Mr. Benby, who did everything, conducted himself outwardly as if he were a sort of man of business in Mrs. Gareth-Lawless' employ. It was open to the lenient to believe that she depended on some mysterious private income. There were people who preferred to try to believe this, but there were those who, in some occult way, knew exactly where her income came from. There were, in fact, hypercritical persons who did not know or notice her, but she had quite an entertaining, smart circle which neither suspicions nor beliefs prevented from placing her in their visiting lists. Coombe DID keep it up in the most perfect manner, some of them said admiringly among themselves. He showed extraordinarily perfect taste. Many fashionable open secrets, accepted by a brilliant world, were not half so fastidiously managed. Andrews knew he had unswervingly lied when he said he



had "spoken to Mrs. Gareth-Lawless." But he never failed to place her in the position of authority. That he should have presented himself on the nursery floor was amazingly abnormal enough to mean some state of mind unregulated by all natural rules. "Him," Andrews thought, "that never steps out of a visitor's place in the drawing-room turning up on the third floor without a word!" One thing she knew, and that came first. Behind all the polite show he was the head of everything. And he was one that you'd better not give back a sound to if you knew what was good for yourself. Whatever people said against his character, he was one of the grand and high ones. A word from him--ever so quiet--and you'd be done for.

She was shaking with fear inwardly, but she undressed Robin and put her in bed, laying everything away and making things tidy for the night.

"This is the Night Nursery, I suppose," Coombe had said when she began. He put up his glasses and looked the uninviting little room over. He scrutinized it and she wondered what his opinion of it might be.

"Yes, my lord. The Day Nursery is through that door." He walked through the door in question and she could see that he moved slowly about it, examining the few pieces of furniture curiously, still with his glass in his eye. She had finished undressing Robin

and had put her in her bed before he came back into the sleeping apartment. By that time, exhausted by the unknown tempest she had passed through, the child had dropped asleep in spite of herself. She was too tired to remember that her enemy was in the next room.

"I have seen the child with you several times when you have not been aware of it," Coombe said to her before he went downstairs. "She has evidently been well taken care of as far as her body is concerned. If you were not venomous--if you had merely struck her, when you lost your temper, you might have had another trial. I know nothing about children, but I know something about the devil, and if ever the devil was in a woman's face and voice the devil was in yours when you dragged the little creature from under the bed. If you had dared, you would have killed her. Look after that temper, young woman. Benby shall keep an eye on you if you take another place as nurse, and I shall know where you are."

"My lord!" Andrews gasped. "You wouldn't overlook a woman and take her living from her and send her to starvation!"

"I would take her living from her and send her to starvation without a shadow of compunction," was the reply made in the fine gentleman's cultivated voice, "--if she were capable of what you were capable of tonight. You are, I judge, about forty, and, though you are lean, you are a powerful woman; the child is, I believe, barely six." And then, looking down at her through his glass, he

added--to her quite shuddering astonishment--in a tone whose very softness made it really awful to her, "Damn you! Damn you!"

"I'll--I swear I'll never let myself go again, my lord!" the woman broke out devoutly.

"I don't think you will. It would cost you too much," he said.

Then he went down the steep, crooked little staircase quite soundlessly and Andrews, rather white and breathless, went and packed her trunk. Robin--tired baby as she was--slept warm and deeply.