CHAPTER XIII

It was no custom of his to outstay other people; in fact, he usually went away comparatively early. Feather could not imagine what his reason could be, but she was sure there was a reason. She was often disturbed by his reasons, and found it difficult to adjust herself to them. How--even if one had a logically brilliant mind--could one calculate on a male being, who seemed not exactly to belong to the race of men.

As a result of the skirt dancing, the furniture of the empty drawing-room was a little scattered and untidy, but Feather had found a suitable corner among cushions on a sofa, after everyone had gone leaving Coombe alone with her. She wished he would sit down, but he preferred to stand in his still, uncomfortable way.

"I know you are going to tell me something," she broke the silence.

"I am. When I went out of the room, I did not drive round to my club as I said I found myself obliged to. I went upstairs to the third floor--to the Nursery."

Feather sat quite upright.

"YOU went up to the Nursery!" If this was the reason for his staying, what on earth had he come upon in the region of the third floor,

and how ridiculously unlike him to allow himself to interfere. Could it be Andrews and Jennings? Surely Andrews was too old.--This passed across her mind in a flash.

"You called Andrews to use her authority with the child when she would not shake hands with me. The little creature, for some reason of her own, evidently feels an antipathy to me. That interested me and I watched her as Andrews whispered in her ear. The woman's vanity was stung. I realized that she whispered a threat. A hint of actual ferocity showed in her eyes in spite of herself. Robin turned pale."

"Andrews was quite right. Children must be punished when they are rude." Feather felt this at once silly and boring. What did he know about such matters?

"The child said, 'Andrews will pinch me!' and I caught Andrews' eye and knew it was true--also that she had done it before. I looked at the woman's long, thin, strong fingers. They were cruel fingers. I do not take liberties, as a rule, but I took a liberty. I excused myself and climbed three flights of stairs."

Never had Feather been so surprised in her life. She looked like a bewildered child.

"But--what COULD it matter to YOU?" she said in soft amaze.

"I don't know," his answer came after a moment's pause. "I have caprices of mood. Certain mental images made my temperature rise. Momentarily it did matter. One is like that at times. Andrews' feline face and her muscular fingers--and the child's extraordinarily exquisite flesh--gave me a second's furious shudder."

Feather quite broke in upon him.

"Are you--are you FOND of children?"

"No," he was really abrupt. "I never thought of such a thing in my life--as being FOND of things."

"That was what--I mean I thought so." Feather faltered, as if in polite acquiescence with a quite natural fact.

Coombe proceeded:

"As I went up the stairs I heard screams and I thought that the pinching had begun. I got up quickly and opened the door and found the woman lying flat on the floor by the bed, dragging out the child who had hidden under it. The woman's face was devilish, and so was her voice. I heard her threats. She got on her feet and dragged the child up and held her between her knees. She clapped her hand over mouth to stifle her shrieks. There I stopped her.

She had a fright at sight of me which taught her something." He ended rather slowly. "I took the great liberty of ordering her to pack her box and leave the house--course," with a slight bow, "using you as my authority."

"Andrews!" cried Feather, aghast. "Has she--gone?"

"Would you have kept her?" he inquired.

"It's true that--that PINCHING" Feather's voice almost held tears, "--really HARD pinching is--is not proper. But Andrews has been invaluable. Everyone says Robin is better dressed and better kept than other children. And she is never allowed to make the least noise--"

"One wouldn't if one were pinched by those devilish, sinewy fingers every time one raised one's voice. Yes. She has gone. I ordered her to put her charge to bed before she packed. I did not leave her alone with Robin. In fact, I walked about the two nurseries and looked them over."

He had walked about the Night Nursery and the Day Nursery! He--the Head of the House of Coombe, whose finely acrid summing up of things, they were all secretly afraid of, if the truth were known. "They" stood for her smart, feverishly pleasure-chasing set. In their way, they half unconsciously tried to propitiate something

in him, always without producing the least effect. Her mental vision presented to her his image as he had walked about the horrid little rooms, his somewhat stiffly held head not much below the low ceilings. He had taken in shabby carpets, furniture, faded walls, general dim dinginess.

"It's an unholy den for anything to spend its days in--that third floor," he made the statement detachedly, in a way. "If she's six, she has lived six years there--and known nothing else."

"All London top floors are like it," said Feather, "and they are all nurseries and school rooms--where there are children."

His faintly smiling glance took in her girl-child slimness in its glittering sheath--the zephyr scarf floating from the snow of her bared loveliness--her delicate soft chin deliciously lifted as she looked up at him.

"How would YOU like it?" he asked.

"But I am not a child," in pretty protest. "Children are--are different!"

"You look like a child," he suddenly said, queerly--as if the aspect of her caught him for an instant and made him absent-minded. "Sometimes--a woman does. Not often."

She bloomed into a kind of delighted radiance.

"You don't often pay me compliments," she said. "That is a beautiful one. Robin--makes it more beautiful."

"It isn't a compliment," he answered, still watching her in the slightly absent manner. "It is--a tragic truth."

He passed his hand lightly across his eyes as if he swept something away, and then both looked and spoke exactly as before.

"I have decided to buy the long lease of this house. It is for sale," he said, casually. "I shall buy it for the child."

"For Robin!" said Feather, helplessly.

"Yes, for Robin."

"It--it would be an income--whatever happened. It is in the very heart of Mayfair," she said, because, in her astonishment--almost consternation--she could think of nothing else. He would not buy it for her. He thought her too silly to trust. But, if it were Robin's--it would be hers also. A girl couldn't turn her own mother into the street. Amid the folds of her narrow being hid just one spark of shrewdness which came to life where she herself

was concerned.

"Two or three rooms--not large ones--can be added at the back," he went on. "I glanced out of a window to see if it could be done."

Incomprehensible as he was, one might always be sure of a certain princeliness in his inexplicable methods. He never was personal or mean. An addition to the slice of a house! That really WAS generous! Entrancement filled her.

"That really is kind of you," she murmured, gratefully. "It seems too much to ask!"

"You did not ask it," was his answer.

"But I shall benefit by it. Nothing COULD BE nicer. These rooms are so much too small," glancing about her in flushed rapture, "And my bedroom is dreadful. I'm obliged to use Rob's for a dressing-room."

"The new rooms will be for Robin," he said. An excellent method he had discovered, of entirely detaching himself from the excitements and emotions of other persons, removed the usual difficulties in the way of disappointing--speaking truths to--or embarrassing people who deserved it. It was this method which had utterly cast down the defences of Andrews. Feather was so wholly left out of the situation that she was actually almost saved from its awkwardness.

"When one is six," he explained, "one will soon be seven--nine--twelve. Then the teens begin to loom up and one cannot be concealed in cupboards on a top floor. Even before that time a governess is necessary, and, even from the abyss of my ignorance, I see that no respectable woman would stand either the Night or the Day Nursery. Your daughter--"

"Oh, don't call her THAT!" cried Feather. "My daughter! It sounds as if she were eighteen!" She felt as if she had a sudden hideous little shock. Six years HAD passed since Bob died! A daughter! A school girl with long hair and long legs to keep out of the way. A grown-up girl to drag about with one. Never would she do it!

"Three sixes are eighteen," Coombe continued, "as was impressed upon one in early years by the multiplication table."

"I never saw you so interested in anything before," Feather faltered. "Climbing steep, narrow, horrid stairs to her nursery! Dismissing her nurse!" She paused a second, because a very ugly little idea had clutched at her. It arose from and was complicated with many fantastic, half formed, secret resentments of the past. It made her laugh a shade hysterical.

"Are you going to see that she is properly brought up and educated, so that if--anyone important falls in love with her she can make a good match?"

Hers was quite a hideous little mind, he was telling himself--fearful in its latter day casting aside of all such small matters as taste and feeling. People stripped the garments from things in these days. He laughed inwardly at himself and his unwitting "these days." Senile severity mouthed just such phrases. Were they not his own days and the outcome of a past which had considered itself so much more decorous? Had not boldly questionable attitudes been held in those other days? How long was it since the Prince Regent himself had flourished? It was only that these days brought it all close against one's eyes. But this exquisite creature had a hideous little mind of her own whatsoever her day.

Later, he confessed to himself that he was unprepared to see her spring to her feet and stand before him absurdly, fantastically near being impassioned.

"You think I as too silly to SEE anything," she broke forth. "But I do see--a long way sometimes. I can't bear it but I do--I do! I shall have a grown-up daughter. She will be the kind of girl everyone will look at--and someone--important--may want to marry her. But, Oh!--" He was reminded of the day when she had fallen at his feet, and clasped his rigid and reluctant knees. This was something of the same feeble desperation of mood. "Oh, WHY couldn't someone like that have wanted to marry ME! See!" she was like a pathetic fairy as she spread her nymphlike arms, "how PRETTY I

am!"

His gaze held her a moment in the singular fashion with which she had become actually familiar, because--at long intervals--she kept seeing it again. He quite gently took her fingers and returned her to her sofa.

"Please sit down again," he requested. "It will be better."

She sat down without another imbecile word to say. As for him, he changed the subject.

"With your permission, Benby will undertake the business of the lease and the building," he explained. "The plans will be brought to you. We will go over them together, if you wish. There will be decent rooms for Robin and her governess. The two nurseries can be made fit for human beings to live in and used for other purposes. The house will be greatly improved."

It was nearly three o'clock when Feather went upstairs to her dozing maid, because, after he had left her, she sat some time in the empty, untidy little drawing-room and gazed straight before her at a painted screen on which shepherdesses and swains were dancing in a Watteau glade infested by flocks of little Loves.