

CHAPTER XIV

When, from Robin's embarrassed young consciousness, there had welled up the hesitating confession, "She--doesn't like me," she could not, of course, have found words in which to make the reasons for her knowledge clear, but they had for herself no obscurity. The fair being who, at rare intervals, fluttered on the threshold of her world had a way of looking at her with a shade of aloof distaste in her always transient gaze.

The unadorned fact was that Feather did NOT like her. She had been outraged by her advent. A baby was absurdly "out of the picture." So far as her mind encompassed a future, she saw herself flitting from flower to flower of "smart" pleasures and successes, somehow, with more money and more exalted invitations--"something" vaguely--having happened to the entire Lawdor progeny, and she, therefore, occupying a position in which it was herself who could gracefully condescend to others. There was nothing so "stodgy" as children in the vision. When the worst came to the worst, she had been consoled by the thought that she had really managed the whole thing very cleverly. It was easier, of course, to so arrange such things in modern days and in town. The Day Nursery and the Night Nursery on the third floor, a smart-looking young woman who knew her business, who even knew what to buy for a child and where to buy it, without troubling any one simplified the situation.

Andrews had been quite wonderful. Nobody can bother one about a healthy, handsome child who is seen meticulously cared for and beautifully dressed, being pushed or led or carried out in the open air every day.

But there had arrived the special morning when she had seen a child who so stood out among a dozen children that she had been startled when she recognized that it was Robin. Andrews had taken her charge to Hyde Park that day and Feather was driving through the Row on her way to a Knightsbridge shop. First her glance had been caught by the hair hanging to the little hips--extraordinary hair in which Andrews herself had a pride. Then she had seen the slender, exquisitely modeled legs, and the dancing sway of the small body. A wonderfully cut, stitched, and fagotted smock and hat she had, of course, taken in at a flash. When the child suddenly turned to look at some little girls in a pony cart, the amazing damask of her colour, and form and depth of eye had given her another slight shock. She realized that what she had thrust lightly away in a corner of her third floor produced an unmistakable effect when turned out into the light of a gay world. The creature was tall too--for six years old. Was she really six? It seemed incredible. Ten more years and she would be sixteen.

Mrs. Heppel-Bevill had a girl of fifteen, who was a perfect catastrophe. She read things and had begun to talk about her "right to be a woman." Emily Heppel-Bevill was only thirty-seven--three

years from forty. Feather had reached the stage of softening in her disdain of the women in their thirties. She had found herself admitting that--in these days--there were women of forty who had not wholly passed beyond the pale into that outer darkness where there was weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. But there was no denying that this six year old baby, with the dancing step, gave one--almost hysterically--"to think." Her imagination could not--never had and never would she have allowed it to--grasp any belief that she herself could change. A Feather, No! But a creature of sixteen, eighteen--with eyes that shape--with lashes an inch long--with yards of hair--standing by one's side in ten years! It was ghastly!

Coombe, in his cold perfunctory way, climbing the crooked, narrow stairs, dismissing Andrews--looking over the rooms--dismissing them, so to speak, and then remaining after the rest had gone to reveal to her a new abnormal mood--that, in itself alone, was actually horrible. It was abnormal and yet he had always been more or less like that in all things. Despite everything--everything--he had never been in love with her at all. At first she had believed he was--then she had tried to make him care for her. He had never failed her, he had done everything in his grand seigneur fashion. Nobody dare make gross comment upon her, but, while he saw her loveliness as only such a man could--she had gradually realized that she had never had even a chance with him. She could not even think that if she had not been so silly and frightened that

awful day six years ago, and had not lost her head, he might have admired her more and more and in the end asked her to marry him. He had said there must be no mistakes, and she had not been allowed to fall into making one. The fact that she had not, had, finally, made her feel the power of a certain fascination in him. She thought it was a result of his special type of looks, his breeding, the wonderful clothes he wore--but it was, in truth, his varieties of inaccessibility.

"A girl might like him," she had said to herself that night--she sat up late after he left her. "A girl who--who had up-to-date sense might. Modern people don't grow old as they used to. At fifty-five he won't be fat, or bald and he won't have lost his teeth. People have found out they needn't. He will be as thin and straight as he is today--and nothing can alter his nose. He will be ten years cleverer than he is now. Buying the house for a child of that age--building additional rooms for her!"

In the fevered, rapid, deep-dipping whirl of the life which was the only one she knew, she had often seen rather trying things happen--almost unnatural changes in situations. People had overcome the folly of being afraid to alter their minds and their views about what they had temporarily believed were permanent bonds and emotions. Bonds had become old fogeyish. Marriages went to pieces, the parties in love affairs engaged in a sort of "dance down the middle" and turn other people's partners. The rearrangement of

figures sometimes made for great witticism. Occasionally people laughed at themselves as at each other. The admirers of engaging matrons had been known to renew their youth at the coming-out balls of lovely daughters in their early teens, and to end by assuming the flowery chains of a new allegiance. Time had, of course, been when such a volte face would have aroused condemnation and indignant discussion, but a humorous leniency spent but little time in selecting terms of severity. Feather had known of several such contretemps ending in quite brilliant matches. The enchanting mothers usually consoled themselves with great ease, and, if the party of each part was occasionally wittily pungent in her comments on the other, everybody laughed and nobody had time to criticize. A man who had had much to bestow and who preferred in youth to bestow it upon himself was not infrequently more in the mood for the sharing of marriage when years had revealed to him the distressing fact that he was not, and had never been, the centre of the universe, which distressing fact is one so unfairly concealed from youth in bloom.

It was, of course, but as a vaguely outlined vision that these recognitions floated through what could only be alleged to be Feather's mind because there was no other name for it. The dark little staircase, the rejected and despised third floor, and Coombe detachedly announcing his plans for the house, had set the--so to speak--rather malarious mist flowing around her. A trying thing was that it did not really dispel itself altogether, but continued

to hang about the atmosphere surrounding other and more cheerful things. Almost impalpably it added to the familiar feeling--or lack of feeling--with regard to Robin. She had not at all hated the little thing; it had merely been quite true that, in an inactive way, she had not LIKED her. In the folds of the vague mist quietly floated the truth that she now liked her less.

Benby came to see and talk to her on the business of the structural changes to be made. He conducted himself precisely as though her views on the matter were of value and could not, in fact, be dispensed with. He brought the architect's plans with him and explained them with care. They were clever plans which made the most of a limited area. He did not even faintly smile when it revealed itself to him, as it unconsciously did, that Mrs. Gareth-Lawless regarded their adroit arrangement as a singular misuse of space which could have been much better employed for necessities of her own. She was much depressed by the ground floor addition which might have enlarged her dining-room, but which was made into a sitting-room for Robin and her future governess.

"And that is in ADDITION to her schoolroom which might have been thrown into the drawing-room--besides the new bedrooms which I needed so much," she said.

"The new nurse, who is a highly respectable person," explained Benby, "could not have been secured if she had not known that

improvements were being made. The reconstruction of the third floor will provide suitable accommodations."

The special forte of Dowson, the new nurse, was a sublimated respectability far superior to smartness. She had been mystically produced by Benby and her bonnets and jackets alone would have revealed her selection from almost occult treasures. She wore bonnets and "jackets," not hats and coats.

"In the calm days of Her Majesty, nurses dressed as she does. I do not mean in the riotous later years of her reign--but earlier--when England dreamed in terms of Crystal Palaces and Great Exhibitions. She can only be the result of excavation," Coombe said of her.

She was as proud of her respectability as Andrews had been of her smartness. This had, in fact, proved an almost insuperable obstacle to her engagement. The slice of a house, with its flocking in and out of chattering, smart people in marvellous clothes was not the place for her, nor was Mrs. Gareth-Lawless the mistress of her dreams. But her husband had met with an accident and must be kept in a hospital, and an invalid daughter must live by the seaside--and suddenly, when things were at their worst with her, had come Benby with a firm determination to secure her with wages such as no other place would offer. Besides which she had observed as she had lived.

"Things have changed," she reflected soberly. "You've got to resign yourself and not be too particular."

She accepted the third floor, as Benby had said, because it was to be rearranged and the Night and Day Nurseries, being thrown into one, repainted and papered would make a decent place to live in. At the beautiful little girl given into her charge she often looked in a puzzled way, because she knew a good deal about children, and about this one there was something odd. Her examination of opened drawers and closets revealed piles of exquisite garments of all varieties, all perfectly kept. In these dingy holes, which called themselves nurseries, she found evidence that money had been spent like water so that the child, when she was seen, might look like a small princess. But she found no plaything--no dolls or toys, and only one picture book, and that had "Donal" written on the fly leaf and evidently belonged to someone else.

What exactly she would have done when she had had time to think the matter over, she never knew, because, a few days after her arrival, a tall, thin gentleman, coming up the front steps as she was going out with Robin, stopped and spoke to her as if he knew who she was.

"You know the kind of things children like to play with, nurse?" he said.

She respectfully replied that she had had long experience with young desires. She did not know as yet who he was, but there was that about him which made her feel that, while there was no knowing what height his particular exaltation in the matter of rank might reach, one would be safe in setting it high.

"Please go to one of the toy shops and choose for the child what she will like best. Dolls--games--you will know what to select. Send the bill to me at Coombe House. I am Lord Coombe."

"Thank you, my lord," Dowson answered, with a sketch of a curtsy, "Miss Robin, you must hold out your little hand and say 'thank you' to his lordship for being so kind. He's told Dowson to buy you some beautiful dolls and picture books as a present."

Robin's eyelashes curled against her under brows in her wide, still glance upward at him. Here was "the one" again! She shut her hand tightly into a fist behind her back.

Lord Coombe smiled a little--not much.

"She does not like me," he said. "It is not necessary that she should give me her hand. I prefer that she shouldn't, if she doesn't want to. Good morning, Dowson."

To the well-regulated mind of Dowson, this seemed treating too

lightly a matter as serious as juvenile incivility. She remonstrated gravely and at length with Robin.

"Little girls must behave prettily to kind gentlemen who are friends of their mammas. It is dreadful to be rude and not say 'thank you'," she said.

But as she talked she was vaguely aware that her words passed by the child's ears as the summer wind passed. Perhaps it was all a bit of temper and would disappear and leave no trace behind. At the same time, there WAS something queer about the little thing. She had a listless way of sitting staring out of the window and seeming to have no desire to amuse herself. She was too young to be listless and she did not care for her food. Dowson asked permission to send for the doctor and, when he came, he ordered sea air.

"Of course, you can take her away for a few weeks," Mrs. Gareth-Lawless said. Here she smiled satirically and added, "But I can tell you what it is all about. The little minx actually fell in love with a small boy she met in the Square Gardens and, when his mother took him from London, she began to mope like a tiresome girl in her teens. It's ridiculous, but is the real trouble."

"Oh!" said Dowson, the low and respectful interjection expressing a shade of disapproval, "Children do have fancies, ma'am. She'll

get over it if we give her something else to think of."

The good woman went to one of the large toy shops and bought a beautiful doll, a doll's house, and some picture books. When they were brought up to the Day Nursery, Robin was asleep after a rather long walk, which Dowson had decided would be good for her. When she came later into the room, after the things had been unpacked, she regarded them with an expression of actual dislike.

"Isn't that a beautiful doll?" said Dowson, good-humouredly. "And did you ever see such a lovely house? It was kind Lord Coombe who gave them to you. Just you look at the picture books."

Robin put her hands behind her back and would not touch them. Dowson, who was a motherly creature with a great deal of commonsense, was set thinking. She began to make guesses, though she was not yet sufficiently familiar with the household to guess from any firm foundation of knowledge of small things.

"Come here, dear," she said, and drew the small thing to her knee.

"Is it because you don't love Lord Coombe?" she asked.

"Yes," she answered.

"But why?" said Dowson. "When he is such a kind gentleman?"

But Robin would not tell her why and never did. She never told any one, until years had passed, how this had been the beginning of a hatred. The toys were left behind when she was taken to the seaside. Dowson tried to persuade her to play with them several times, but she would not touch them, so they were put away. Feeling that she was dealing with something unusual, and, being a kindly person, Dowson bought her some playthings on her own account. They were simple things, but Robin was ready enough to like them.

"Did YOU give them to me?" she asked.

"Yes, I did, Miss Robin."

The child drew near her after a full minute of hesitation.

"I will KISS you!" she said solemnly, and performed the rite as whole-souledly as Donal had done.

"Dear little mite!" exclaimed the surprised Dowson. "Dear me!" And there was actual moisture in her eyes as she squeezed the small body in her arms.

"She's the strangest mite I ever nursed," was her comment to Mrs. Blayne below stairs. "It was so sudden, and she did it as if she'd never done it before. I'd actually been thinking she hadn't any feeling at all."

"No reason why she should have. She's been taken care of by the clock and dressed like a puppet, but she's not been treated human!"
broke forth Mrs. Blayne.

Then the whole story was told--the "upstairs" story with much vivid description, and the mentioning of many names and the dotting of many "i's". Dowson had heard certain things only through vague rumour, but now she knew and began to see her way. She had not heard names before, and the definite inclusion of Lord Coombe's suggested something to her.

"Do you think the child could be JEALOUS of his lordship?" she suggested.

"She might if she knew anything about him--but she never saw him until the night she was taken down into the drawing-room. She's lived upstairs like a little dog in its kennel."

"Well," Dowson reflected aloud, "it sounds almost silly to talk of a child's hating any one, but that bit of a thing's eyes had fair hate in them when she looked up at him where he stood. That was what puzzled me."