CHAPTER XV

Before Robin had been taken to the seaside to be helped by the bracing air of the Norfolk coast to recover her lost appetite and forget her small tragedy, she had observed that unaccustomed things were taking place in the house. Workmen came in and out through the mews at the back and brought ladders with them and tools in queer bags. She heard hammerings which began very early in the morning and went on all day. As Andrews had trained her not to ask tiresome questions, she only crept now and then to a back window and peeped out. But in a few days Dowson took her away.

When she came back to London, she was not taken up the steep dark stairs to the third floor. Dowson led her into some rooms she had never seen before. They were light and airy and had pretty walls and furniture. A sitting-room on the ground floor had even a round window with plants in it and a canary bird singing in a cage.

"May we stay here?" she asked Dowson in a whisper.

"We are going to live here," was the answer.

And so they did.

At first Feather occasionally took her intimates to see the

additional apartments.

"In perfect splendour is the creature put up, and I with a bedroom like a coalhole and such drawing-rooms as you see each time you enter the house!" she broke forth spitefully one day when she forgot herself.

She said it to the Starling and Harrowby, who had been simply gazing about them in fevered mystification, because the new development was a thing which must invoke some more or less interesting explanation. At her outbreak, all they could do was to gaze at her with impartial eyes, which suggested question, and Feather shrugged pettish shoulders.

"You knew I didn't do it. How could I?" she said. "It is a queer whim of Coombe's. Of course, it is not the least like him. I call it morbid."

After which people knew about the matter and found it a subject for edifying and quite stimulating discussion. There was something fantastic in the situation. Coombe was the last man on earth to have taken the slightest notice of the child's existence! It was believed that he had never seen her--except in long clothes--until she had glared at him and put her hand behind her back the night she was brought into the drawing-room. She had been adroitly kept tucked away in an attic somewhere. And now behold an addition of

several wonderful, small rooms built, furnished and decorated for her alone, where she was to live as in a miniature palace attended by servitors! Coombe, as a purveyor of nursery appurtenances, was regarded with humour, the general opinion being that the eruption of a volcano beneath his feet alone could have awakened his somewhat chill self-absorption to the recognition of any child's existence.

"To be exact we none of us really know anything in particular about his mental processes." Harrowby pondered aloud. "He's capable of any number of things we might not understand, if he condescended to tell us about them--which he would never attempt. He has a remote, brilliantly stored, cynical mind. He owns that he is of an inhuman selfishness. I haven't a suggestion to make, but it sets one searching through the purlieus of one's mind for an approximately reasonable explanation."

"Why 'purlieus'?" was the Starling's inquiry. Harrowby shrugged his shoulders ever so lightly.

"Well, one isn't searching for reasons founded on copy-book axioms," he shook his head. "Coombe? No."

There was a silence given to occult thought.

"Feather is really in a rage and is too Feathery to be able to conceal it," said Starling.

"Feather would be--inevitably," Harrowby lifted his near-sighted eyes to her curiously. "Can you see Feather in the future--when Robin is ten years older?"

"I can," the Starling answered.

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The years which followed were changing years--growing years. Life and entertainment went on fast and furiously in all parts of London, and in no part more rapidly than in the slice of a house whose front always presented an air of having been freshly decorated, in spite of summer rain and winter soot and fog. The plants in the window boxes seemed always in bloom, being magically replaced in the early morning hours when they dared to hint at flagging. Mrs. Gareth-Lawless, it was said, must be renewed in some such mysterious morning way, as she merely grew prettier as she neared thirty and passed it. Women did in these days! Which last phrase had always been a useful one, probably from the time of the Flood. Old fogeys, male and female, had used it in the past as a means of scathingly unfavourable comparison, growing flushed and almost gobbling like turkey cocks in their indignation. Now, as a phrase, it was a support and a mollifier. "In these days" one knew better how to amuse oneself, was more free to snatch at agreeable opportunity, less in bondage to old fancies which had called themselves beliefs;

everything whirled faster and more lightly--danced, two-stepped, instead of marching.

Robin vaguely connected certain changes in her existence with the changes which took place in the fashion of sleeves and skirts which appeared to produce radical effects in the world she caught glimpses of. Sometimes sleeves were closely fitted to people's arms, then puffs sprang from them and grew until they were enormous and required delicate manipulation when coats were put on; then their lavishness of material fell from the shoulder to the wrists and hung there swaying until some sudden development of skirt seemed to distract their attention from themselves and they shrank into unimportance and skirts changed instead. Afterwards, sometimes figures were slim and encased in sheathlike draperies, sometimes folds rippled about feet, "fullness" crept here or there or disappeared altogether, trains grew longer or shorter or wider or narrower, cashmeres, grosgrain silks and heavy satins were suddenly gone and chiffon wreathed itself about the world and took possession of it. Bonnets ceased to exist and hats were immense or tiny, tall or flat, tilted at the back, at the side, at the front, worn over the face or dashingly rolled back from it; feathers drooped or stood upright at heights which rose and fell and changed position with the changing seasons. No garment or individual wore the same aspect for more than a month's time. It was necessary to change all things with a rapidity matching the change of moods and fancies which altered at the rate of the automobiles which dashed here

and there and everywhere, through country roads, through town, through remote places with an unsparing swiftness which set a new pace for the world.

"I cannot hark back regretfully to stage coaches," said Lord Coombe. "Even I was not born early enough for that. But in the days of my youth and innocence express trains seemed almost supernatural. One could drive a pair of horses twenty miles to make a country visit, but one could not drive back the same day. One's circle had its limitations and degrees of intimacy. Now it is possible motor fifty miles to lunch and home to dine with guests from the remotest corners of the earth. Oceans are crossed in six days, and the eager flit from continent to continent. Engagements can be made by cable and the truly enterprising can accept an invitation to dine in America on a fortnight's notice. Telephones communicate in a few seconds and no one is secure from social intercourse for fifteen minutes. Acquaintances and correspondence have no limitations because all the inhabitants of the globe can reach one by motor or electricity. In moments of fatigue I revert to the days of Queen Anne with pleasure."

While these changes went on, Robin lived in her own world in her own quarters at the rear of the slice of a house. During the early years spent with Dowson, she learned gradually that life was a better thing than she had known in the dreary gloom of the third floor Day and Night Nurseries. She was no longer left to spend

hours alone, nor was she taken below stairs to listen blankly to servants talking to each other of mysterious things with which she herself and the Lady Downstairs and "him" were somehow connected, her discovery of this fact being based on the dropping of voices and sidelong glances at her and sudden warning sounds from Andrews. She realized that Dowson would never pinch her, and the rooms she lived in were pretty and bright.

Gradually playthings and picture books appeared in them, which she gathered Dowson presented her with. She gathered this from Dowson herself.

She had never played with the doll, and, by chance a day arriving when Lord Coombe encountered Dowson in the street without her charge, he stopped her again and spoke as before.

"Is the little girl well and happy, Nurse?" he asked.

"Quite well, my lord, and much happier than she used to be."

"Did she," he hesitated slightly, "like the playthings you bought her?"

Dowson hesitated more than slightly but, being a sensible woman and at the same time curious about the matter, she spoke the truth.

"She wouldn't play with them at all, my lord. I couldn't persuade her to. What her child's fancy was I don't know."

"Neither do I--except that it is founded on a distinct dislike," said Coombe. There was a brief pause. "Are you fond of toys yourself, Dowson?" he inquired coldly.

"I am that--and I know how to choose them, your lordship," replied Dowson, with a large, shrewd intelligence.

"Then oblige me by throwing away the doll and its accompaniments and buying some toys for yourself, at my expense. You can present them to Miss Robin as a personal gift. She will accept them from you."

He passed on his way and Dowson looked after him interestedly.

"If she was his," she thought, "I shouldn't be puzzled. But she's not--that I've ever heard of. He's got some fancy of his own the same as Robin has, though you wouldn't think it to look at him. I'd like to know what it is."

It was a fancy--an old, old fancy--it harked back nearly thirty years--to the dark days of youth and passion and unending tragedy whose anguish, as it then seemed, could never pass--but which, nevertheless, had faded with the years as they flowed by. And yet

left him as he was and had been. He was not sentimental about it, he smiled at himself drearily--though never at the memory--when it rose again and, through its vague power, led him to do strange things curiously verging on the emotional and eccentric. But even the child--who quite loathed him for some fantastic infant reason of her own--even the child had her part in it. His soul oddly withdrew itself into a far remoteness as he walked away and Piccadilly became a shadow and a dream.

Dowson went home and began to pack neatly in a box the neglected doll and the toys which had accompanied her. Robin seeing her doing it, asked a question.

"Are they going back to the shop?"

"No. Lord Coombe is letting me give them to a little girl who is very poor and has to lie in bed because her back hurts her. His lordship is so kind he does not want you to be troubled with them. He is not angry. He is too good to be angry."

That was not true, thought Robin. He had done THAT THING she remembered! Goodness could not have done it. Only badness.

When Dowson brought in a new doll and other wonderful things, a little hand enclosed her wrist quite tightly as she was unpacking the boxes. It was Robin's and the small creature looked at her

with a questioning, half appealing, half fierce.

"Did he send them, Dowson?"

"They are a present from me," Dowson answered comfortably, and Robin said again,

"I want to kiss you. I like to kiss you. I do."

To those given to psychical interests and speculations, it might have suggested itself that, on the night when the creature who had seemed to Andrews a soft tissued puppet had suddenly burst forth into defiance and fearless shrillness, some cerebral change had taken place in her. From that hour her softness had become a thing of the past. Dowson had not found a baby, but a brooding, little, passionate being. She was neither insubordinate nor irritable, but Dowson was conscious of a certain intensity of temperament in her. She knew that she was always thinking of things of which she said almost nothing. Only a sensible motherly curiosity, such as Dowson's could have made discoveries, but a rare question put by the child at long intervals sometimes threw a faint light. There were questions chiefly concerning mothers and their habits and customs. They were such as, in their very unconsciousness, revealed a strange past history. Lights were most unconsciously thrown by Mrs. Gareth-Lawless herself. Her quite amiable detachment from all shadow of responsibility, her brilliantly unending

occupations, her goings in and out, the flocks of light, almost noisy, intimates who came in and out with her revealed much to a respectable person who had soberly watched the world.

"The Lady Downstairs is my mother, isn't she?" Robin inquired gravely once.

"Yes, my dear," was Dowson's answer.

A pause for consideration of the matter and then from Robin:

"All mothers are not alike, Dowson, are they?"

"No, my dear," with wisdom.

Though she was not yet seven, life had so changed for her that it was a far cry back to the Spring days in the Square Gardens. She went back, however, back into that remote ecstatic past.

"The Lady Downstairs is not--alike," she said at last, "Donal's mother loved him. She let him sit in the same chair with her and read in picture books. She kissed him when he was in bed."

Jennings, the young footman who was a humourist, had, of course, heard witty references to Robin's love affair while in attendance, and he had equally, of course, repeated them below stairs. Therefore,

Dowson had heard vague rumours but had tactfully refrained from mentioning the subject to her charge.

"Who was Donal?" she said now, but quite quietly. Robin did not know that a confidante would have made her first agony easier to bear. She was not really being confidential now, but, realizing Dowson's comfortable kindliness, she knew that it would be safe to speak to her.

"He was a big boy," she answered keeping her eyes on Dowson's face. "He laughed and ran and jumped. His eyes--" she stopped there because she could not explain what she had wanted to say about these joyous young eyes, which were the first friendly human ones she had known.

"He lives in Scotland," she began again. "His mother loved him. He kissed me. He went away. Lord Coombe sent him."

Dawson could not help her start.

"Lord Coombe!" she exclaimed.

Robin came close to her and ground her little fist into her knee, until its plumpness felt almost bruised.

"He is bad--bad--bad!" and she looked like a little demon.

Being a wise woman, Dowson knew at once that she had come upon a hidden child volcano, and it would be well to let it seethe into silence. She was not a clever person, but long experience had taught her that there were occasions when it was well to leave a child alone. This one would not answer if she were questioned. She would only become stubborn and furious, and no child should be goaded into fury. Dowson had, of course, learned that the boy was a relative of his lordship's and had a strict Scottish mother who did not approve of the slice of a house. His lordship might have been concerned in the matter--or he might not. But at least Dowson had gained a side light. And how the little thing had cared! Actually as if she had been a grown girl, Dowson found herself thinking uneasily.

She was rendered even a trifle more uneasy a few days later when she came upon Robin sitting in a corner on a footstool with a picture book on her knee, and she recognized it as the one she had discovered during her first exploitation of the resources of the third floor nursery. It was inscribed "Donal" and Robin was not looking at it alone, but at something she held in her hand--something folded in a crumpled, untidy bit of paper.

Making a reason for nearing her corner, Dowson saw what the paper held. The contents looked like the broken fragments of some dried

leaves. The child was gazing at them with a piteous, bewildered face--so piteous that Dowson was sorry.

"Do you want to keep those?" she asked.

"Yes," with a caught breath. "Yes."

"I will make you a little silk bag to hold them in," Dowson said, actually feeling rather piteous herself. The poor, little lamb with her picture book and her bits of broken dry leaves--almost like senna.

She sat down near her and Robin left her footstool and came to her. She laid the picture book on her lap and the senna like fragments of leaves on its open page.

"Donal brought it to show me," she quavered. "He made pretty things on the leaves--with his dirk." She recalled too much--too much all at once. Her eyes grew rounder and larger with inescapable woe; "Donal did! Donal!" And suddenly she hid her face deep in Dowson's skirts and the tempest broke. She was so small a thing--so inarticulate--and these were her dead! Dowson could only catch her in her arms, drag her up on her knee, and rock her to and fro.

"Good Lord! Good Lord!" was her inward ejaculation. "And she not seven! What'll she do when she's seventeen! She's one of them

there's no help for!"

It was the beginning of an affection. After this, when Dowson tucked Robin in bed each night, she kissed her. She told her stories and taught her to sew and to know her letters. Using some discretion she found certain little playmates for her in the Gardens. But there were occasions when all did not go well, and some pretty, friendly child, who had played with Robin for a few days, suddenly seemed to be kept strictly by her nurse's side. Once, when she was about ten years old, a newcomer, a dramatic and too richly dressed little person, after a day of wonderful imaginative playing appeared in the Gardens the morning following to turn an ostentatious cold shoulder.

"What is the matter?" asked Robin.

"Oh, we can't play with you any more," with quite a flounce superiority.

"Why not?" said Robin, becoming haughty herself.

"We can't. It's because of Lord Coombe." The little person had really no definite knowledge of how Lord Coombe was concerned, but certain servants' whisperings of names and mysterious phrases had conveyed quite an enjoyable effect of unknown iniquity connected with his lordship.

Robin said nothing to Dowson, but walked up and down the paths reflecting and building a slow fire which would continue to burn in her young heart. She had by then passed the round, soft baby period and had entered into that phase when bodies and legs grow long and slender and small faces lose their first curves and begin to show sharper modeling.

Accepting the situation in its entirety, Dowson had seen that it was well to first reach Lord Coombe with any need of the child's. Afterwards, the form of presenting it to Mrs. Gareth-Lawless must be gone through, but if she were first spoken to any suggestion might be forgotten or intentionally ignored.

Dowson became clever in her calculations as to when his lordship might be encountered and where--as if by chance, and therefore, quite respectfully. Sometimes she remotely wondered if he himself did not make such encounters easy for her. But his manner never altered in its somewhat stiff, expressionless chill of indifference. He never was kindly in his manner to the child if he met her. Dowson felt him at once casual and "lofty." Robin might have been a bit of unconsidered rubbish, the sight of which slightly bored him. Yet the singular fact remained that it was to him one must carefully appeal.

One afternoon Feather swept him, with one or two others, into the sitting-room with the round window in which flowers grew. Robin

was sitting at a low table making pothooks with a lead pencil on a piece of paper Dowson had given her. Dowson had, in fact, set her at the task, having heard from Jennings that his lordship and the other afternoon tea drinkers were to be brought into the "Palace" as Feather ironically chose to call it. Jennings rather liked Dowson, and often told her little things she wanted to know. It was because Lord Coombe would probably come in with the rest that Dowson had set the low, white table in the round windows and suggested the pothooks.

In course of time there was a fluttering and a chatter in the corridor. Feather was bringing some new guests, who had not seen the place before.

"This is where my daughter lives. She is much grander than I am," she said.

"Stand up, Miss Robin, and make your curtsey," whispered Dowson. Robin did as she was told, and Mrs. Gareth-Lawless' pretty brows ran up.

"Look at her legs," she said. "She's growing like Jack and the Bean Stalk--though, I suppose, it was only the Bean Stalk that grew. She'll stick through the top of the house soon. Look at her legs, I ask you."

She always spoke as if the child were an inanimate object and she had, by this time and by this means, managed to sweep from Robin's mind all the old, babyish worship of her loveliness and had planted in its place another feeling. At this moment the other feeling surged and burned.

"They are beautiful legs," remarked a laughing young man jocularly, "but perhaps she does not particularly want us to look at them. Wait until she begins skirt dancing." And everybody laughed at once and the child stood rigid--the object of their light ridicule--not herself knowing that her whole little being was cursing them aloud.

Coombe stepped to the little table and bestowed a casual glance on the pencil marks.

"What is she doing?" he asked as casually of Dowson.

"She is learning to make pothooks, my lord," Dowson answered. "She's a child that wants to be learning things. I've taught her her letters and to spell little words. She's quick--and old enough, your lordship."

"Learning to read and write!" exclaimed Feather.

"Presumption, I call it. I don't know how to read and write--least I don't know how to spell. Do you know how to spell, Collie?" to

the young man, whose name was Colin. "Do you, Genevieve? Do you, Artie?"

"You can't betray me into vulgar boasting," said Collie. "Who does in these days? Nobody but clerks at Peter Robinson's."

"Lord Coombe does--but that's his tiresome superior way," said Feather.

"He's nearly forty years older than most of you. That is the reason," Coombe commented. "Don't deplore your youth and innocence."

They swept through the rooms and examined everything in them. The truth was that the--by this time well known--fact that the unexplainable Coombe had built them made them a curiosity, and a sort of secret source of jokes. The party even mounted to the upper story to go through the bedrooms, and, it was while they were doing this, that Coombe chose to linger behind with Dowson.

He remained entirely expressionless for a few moments. Dowson did not in the least gather whether he meant to speak to her or not. But he did.

"You meant," he scarcely glanced at her, "that she was old enough for a governess."

"Yes, my lord," rather breathless in her hurry to speak before she heard the high heels tapping on the staircase again. "And one that's a good woman as well as clever, if I may take the liberty. A good one if--"

"If a good one would take the place?"

Dowson did not attempt refutation or apology. She knew better.

He said no more, but sauntered out of the room.

As he did so, Robin stood up and made the little "charity bob" of a curtsey which had been part of her nursery education. She was too old now to have refused him her hand, but he never made any advances to her. He acknowledged her curtsey with the briefest nod.

Not three minutes later the high heels came tapping down the staircase and the small gust of visitors swept away also.