

32. A ROOM IN ENCKWORTH COURT

'Are you sure the report is true?'

'I am sure that what I say is true, my lord; but it is hardly to be called a report. It is a secret, known at present to nobody but myself and Mrs. Doncastle's maid.'

The speaker was Lord Mountclere's trusty valet, and the conversation was between him and the viscount in a dressing-room at Enckworth Court, on the evening after the meeting of archaeologists at Corvsgate Castle.

'H'm-h'm; the daughter of a butler. Does Mrs. Doncastle know of this yet, or Mr. Neigh, or any of their friends?'

'No, my lord.'

'You are quite positive?'

'Quite positive. I was, by accident, the first that Mrs. Menlove named the matter to, and I told her it might be much to her advantage if she took particular care it should go no further.'

'Mrs. Menlove! Who's she?'

'The lady's-maid at Mrs. Doncastle's, my lord.'

'O, ah--of course. You may leave me now, Tipman.' Lord Mountclere remained in thought for a moment. 'A clever little puss, to hoodwink us all like this--hee-hee!' he murmured. 'Her education--how finished; and her beauty--so seldom that I meet with such a woman. Cut down my elms to

please a butler's daughter--what a joke--certainly a good joke! To interest me in her on the right side instead of the wrong was strange. But it can be made to change sides--hee-hee!--it can be made to change sides! Tipman!'

Tipman came forward from the doorway.

'Will you take care that that piece of gossip you mentioned to me is not repeated in this house? I strongly disapprove of talebearing of any sort, and wish to hear no more of this. Such stories are never true. Answer me--do you hear? Such stories are never true.'

'I beg pardon, but I think your lordship will find this one true,' said the valet quietly.

'Then where did she get her manners and education? Do you know?'

'I do not, my lord. I suppose she picked 'em up by her wits.'

'Never mind what you suppose,' said the old man impatiently. 'Whenever I ask a question of you tell me what you know, and no more.'

'Quite so, my lord. I beg your lordship's pardon for supposing.'

'H'm-h'm. Have the fashion-books and plates arrived yet?'

'Le Follet has, my lord; but not the others.'

'Let me have it at once. Always bring it to me at once. Are there any handsome ones this time?'

'They are much the same class of female as usual, I think, my lord,' said Tipman, fetching the paper and laying it before him.

'Yes, they are,' said the viscount, leaning back and scrutinizing the faces of the women one by one, and talking softly to himself in a way that had grown upon him as his age increased. 'Yet they are very well: that one with her shoulder turned is pure and charming--the brown-haired one will pass. All very harmless and innocent, but without character; no soul, or inspiration, or eloquence of eye. What an eye was hers! There is not a girl among them so beautiful. . . . Tipman! Come and take it away. I don't think I will subscribe to these papers any longer--how long have I subscribed? Never mind--I take no interest in these things, and I suppose I must give them up. What white article is that I see on the floor yonder?'

'I can see nothing, my lord.'

'Yes, yes, you can. At the other end of the room. It is a white handkerchief. Bring it to me.'

'I beg pardon, my lord, but I cannot see any white handkerchief. Whereabouts does your lordship mean?'

'There in the corner. If it is not a handkerchief, what is it? Walk along till you come to it--that is it; now a little further--now your foot is against it.'

'O that--it is not anything. It is the light reflected against the skirting, so that it looks like a white patch of something--that is all.'

'H'm-hm. My eyes--how weak they are! I am getting old, that's what it is: I am an old man.'

'O no, my lord.'

'Yes, an old man.'

'Well, we shall all be old some day, and so will your lordship, I suppose; but as yet--'

'I tell you I am an old man!'

'Yes, my lord--I did not mean to contradict. An old man in one sense--old in a young man's sense, but not in a house-of-parliament or historical sense. A little oldish--I meant that, my lord.'

'I may be an old man in one sense or in another sense in your mind; but let me tell you there are men older than I--'

'Yes, so there are, my lord.'

'People may call me what they please, and you may be impertinent enough to repeat to me what they say, but let me tell you I am not a very old man after all. I am not an old man.'

'Old in knowledge of the world I meant, my lord, not in years.'

'Well, yes. Experience of course I cannot be without. And I like what is beautiful. Tipman, you must go to Knollsea; don't send, but go yourself, as I wish nobody else to be concerned in this. Go to Knollsea, and find out when the steamboat for Cherbourg starts; and when you have done that, I shall want you to send Taylor to me. I wish Captain Strong to bring the Fawn round into Knollsea Bay. Next week I may want you to go to Cherbourg in the yacht with me--if the Channel is pretty calm--and then perhaps to Rouen and Paris. But I will speak of that to-morrow.'

'Very good, my lord.'

'Meanwhile I recommend that you and Mrs. Menlove repeat nothing you may have heard concerning the lady you just now spoke of. Here is a slight present for Mrs. Menlove; and accept this for yourself.' He handed money.

'Your lordship may be sure we will not,' the valet replied.