

Chapter Two

There were other visitors to Mallowe Court travelling by the 2:30 from Paddington, but they were much smarter people than Miss Fox-Seton, and they were put into a first-class carriage by a footman with a cockade and a long drab coat. Emily, who traveled third with some workmen with bundles, looked out of her window as they passed, and might possibly have breathed a faint sigh if she had not felt in such buoyant spirits. She had put on her revived brown skirt and a white linen blouse with a brown dot on it. A soft brown silk tie was knotted smartly under her fresh collar, and she wore her new sailor hat. Her gloves were brown, and so was her parasol. She looked nice and taut and fresh, but notably inexpensive. The people who went to sales and bought things at three and eleven or "four-three" a yard would have been able add her up and work out her total. But there would be no people capable of the calculation at Mallowe. Even the servants' hall was likely to know less of prices than this one guest did. The people the drab-coated footman escorted to the first-class carriage were a mother and daughter. The mother had regular little features, and would have been pretty if she had not been much too plump. She wore an extremely smart travelling-dress and a wonderful dust-cloak of cool, pale, thin silk. She was not an elegant person, but her appointments were luxurious and self-indulgent. Her daughter was pretty, and had a slim, swaying waist, soft pink cheeks, and a pouting mouth. Her large picture-hat of pale-blue straw, with its big gauze bow and crushed roses, had a slightly exaggerated Parisian

air.

"It is a little too picturesque," Emily thought; "but how lovely she looks in it! I suppose it was so becoming she could not help buying it. I'm sure it's Virot."

As she was looking at the girl admiringly, a man passed her window. He was a tall man with a square face. As he passed close to Emily, he stared through her head as if she had been transparent or invisible. He got into the smoking-carriage next to her.

When the train arrived at Mallowe station, he was one of the first persons who got out. Two of Lady Maria's men were waiting on the platform. Emily recognised their liveries. One met the tall man, touching his hat, and followed him to a high cart, in the shafts of which a splendid iron-gray mare was fretting and dancing. In a few moments the arrival was on the high seat, the footman behind, and the mare speeding up the road. Miss Fox-Seton found herself following the second footman and the mother and daughter, who were being taken to the landau waiting outside the station. The footman piloted them, merely touching his hat quickly to Emily, being fully aware that she could take care of herself.

This she did promptly, looking after her box, and seeing it safe in the Mallowe omnibus. When she reached the landau, the two other visitors were in it. She got in, and in entire contentment sat down with her back

to the horses.

The mother and daughter wore for a few minutes a somewhat uneasy air. They were evidently sociable persons, but were not quite sure how to begin a conversation with an as yet unintroduced lady who was going to stay at the country house to which they were themselves invited.

Emily herself solved the problem, producing her commonplace with a friendly tentative smile.

"Isn't it a lovely country?" she said.

"It's perfect," answered the mother. "I've never visited Europe before, and the English country seems to me just exquisite. We have a summer place in America, but the country is quite different."

She was good-natured and disposed to talk, and, with Emily Fox-Seton's genial assistance, conversation flowed. Before they were half-way to Mallowe, it had revealed itself that they were from Cincinnati, and after a winter spent in Paris, largely devoted to visits to Paquin, Doucet, and Virot, they had taken a house in Mayfair for the season. Their name was Brooke. Emily thought she remembered hearing of them as people who spent a great deal of money and went incessantly to parties, always in new and lovely clothes. The girl had been presented by the American minister, and had had a sort of success because she dressed and danced exquisitely. She was the kind of American girl who ended by

marrying a title. She had sparkling eyes and a delicate tip-tilted nose. But even Emily guessed that she was an astute little person.

"Have you ever been to Mallowe Court before?" she inquired.

"No; and I am so looking forward to it. It is so beautiful."

"Do you know Lady Maria very well?"

"I've known her about three years. She has been very kind to me."

"Well, I shouldn't have taken her for a particularly kind person. She's too sharp."

Emily amiably smiled. "She's so clever," she replied.

"Do you know the Marquis of Walderhurst?" asked Mrs. Brooke.

"No," answered Miss Fox-Seton. She had no part in that portion of Lady Maria's life which was illumined by cousins who were marquises. Lord Walderhurst did not drop in to afternoon tea. He kept himself for special dinner-parties.

"Did you see the man who drove away in the high cart?" Mrs. Brooke continued, with a touch of fevered interest. "Cora thought it must be the marquis. The servant who met him wore the same livery as the man up

there"--with a nod toward the box.

"It was one of Lady Maria's servants," said Emily; "I have seen him in South Audley Street. And Lord Walderhurst was to be at Mallowe. Lady Maria mentioned it."

"There, mother!" exclaimed Cora.

"Well, of course if he is to be there, it will make it interesting," returned her mother, in a tone in which lurked an admission of relief. Emily wondered if she had wanted to go somewhere else and had been firmly directed toward Mallowe by her daughter.

"We heard a great deal of him in London this season," Mrs. Brooks went on.

Miss Cora Brooke laughed.

"We heard that at least half a dozen people were determined to marry him," she remarked with pretty scorn. "I should think that to meet a girl who was indifferent might be good for him."

"Don't be too indifferent, Cora," said her mother, with ingenuous ineptness.

It was a very stupid bit of revelation, and Miss Brooke's eyes flashed.

If Emily Fox-Seton had been a sharp woman, she would have observed that, if the rôle of indifferent and piquant young person could be made dangerous to Lord Walderhurst, it would be made so during this visit. The man was in peril from this beauty from Cincinnati and her rather indiscreet mother, though upon the whole, the indiscreet maternal parent might unconsciously form his protection.

But Emily only laughed amiably, as at a humorous remark. She was ready to accept almost anything as humour.

"Well, he would be a great match for any girl," she said. "He is so rich, you know. He is very rich."

When they reached Mallowe, and were led out upon the lawn, where the tea was being served under embowering trees, they found a group of guests eating little hot cakes and holding teacups in their hands. There were several young women, and one of them--a very tall, very fair girl, with large eyes as blue as forget-me-nots, and with a lovely, limp, and long blue frock of the same shade--had been one of the beauties of the past season. She was a Lady Agatha Slade, and Emily began to admire her at once. She felt her to be a sort of added boon bestowed by kind Fate upon herself. It was so delightful that she should be of this particular house-party--this lovely creature, whom she had only known previously through pictures in ladies' illustrated papers. If it should occur to her to wish to become the Marchioness of Walderhurst, what could possibly prevent the consummation of her desire? Surely not Lord

Walderhurst himself, if he was human. She was standing, leaning lightly against the trunk of an ilex-tree, and a snow-white Borzoi was standing close to her, resting his long, delicate head against her gown, encouraging the caresses of her fair, stroking hand. She was in this attractive pose when Lady Maria turned in her seat and said:

"There's Walderhurst."

The man who had driven himself over from the station in the cart was coming towards them across the grass. He was past middle life and plain, but was of good height and had an air. It was perhaps, on the whole, rather an air of knowing what he wanted.

Emily Fox-Seton, who by that time was comfortably seated in a cushioned basket-chair, sipping her own cup of tea, gave him the benefit of the doubt when she wondered if he was not really distinguished and aristocratic-looking. He was really neither, but was well-built and well-dressed, and had good grayish-brown eyes, about the colour of his grayish-brown hair. Among these amiably worldly people, who were not in the least moved by an altruistic prompting, Emily's greatest capital consisted in the fact that she did not expect to be taken the least notice of. She was not aware that it was her capital, because the fact was so wholly a part of the simple contentedness of her nature that she had not thought about it at all. The truth was that she found all her entertainment and occupation in being an audience or a spectator. It did not occur to her to notice that, when the guests were presented to him,

Lord Walderhurst barely glanced at her surface as he bowed, and could scarcely be said to forget her existence the next second, because he had hardly gone to the length of recognising it. As she enjoyed her extremely nice cup of tea and little buttered scone, she also enjoyed looking at his Lordship discreetly, and trying to make an innocent summing up of his mental attitudes.

Lady Maria seemed to like him and to be pleased to see him. He himself seemed, in an undemonstrative way, to like Lady Maria. He also was evidently glad to get his tea, and enjoyed it as he sat at his cousin's side. He did not pay very much attention to any one else. Emily was slightly disappointed to see that he did not glance at the beauty and the Borzoi more than twice, and then that his examination seemed as much for the Borzoi as for the beauty. She could not help also observing that since he had joined the circle it had become more animated, so far at least as the female members were concerned. She could not help remembering Lady Maria's remark about the effect he produced on women when he entered a room. Several interesting or sparkling speeches had already been made. There was a little more laughter and chattiness, which somehow it seemed to be quite open to Lord Walderhurst to enjoy, though it was not exactly addressed to him. Miss Cora Brooke, however, devoted herself to a young man in white flannels with an air of tennis about him. She sat a little apart and talked to him in a voice soft enough to even exclude Lord Walderhurst. Presently she and her companion got up and sauntered away. They went down the broad flight of ancient stone steps which led to the tennis-court, lying in full view below the

lawn. There they began to play tennis. Miss Brooke skimmed and darted about like a swallow. The swirl of her lace petticoats was most attractive.

"That girl ought not to play tennis in shoes with ridiculous heels," remarked Lord Walderhurst. "She will spoil the court."

Lady Maria broke into a little chuckle.

"She wanted to play at this particular moment," she said. "And as she has only just arrived, it did not occur to her to come out to tea in tennis-shoes."

"She'll spoil the court all the same," said the marquis. "What clothes! It's amazing how girls dress now."

"I wish I had such clothes," answered Lady Maria, and she chuckled again. "She's got beautiful feet."

"She's got Louis Quinze heels," returned his Lordship.

At all events, Emily Fox-Seton thought Miss Brooke seemed to intend to rather keep out of his way and to practise no delicate allurements. When her tennis-playing was at an end, she sauntered about the lawn and terraces with her companion, tilting her parasol prettily over her shoulder, so that it formed an entrancing background to her face and

head. She seemed to be entertaining the young man. His big laugh and the silver music of her own lighter merriment rang out a little tantalisingly.

"I wonder what Cora is saying," said Mrs. Brooke to the group at large.

"She always makes men laugh so."

Emily Fox-Seton felt an interest herself, the merriment sounded so attractive. She wondered if perhaps to a man who had been so much run after a girl who took no notice of his presence and amused other men so much might not assume an agreeable aspect.

But he took more notice of Lady Agatha Slade than of any one else that evening. She was placed next to him at dinner, and she really was radiant to look upon in palest green chiffon. She had an exquisite little head, with soft hair piled with wondrous lightness upon it, and her long little neck swayed like the stem of a flower. She was lovely enough to arouse in the beholder's mind the anticipation of her being silly, but she was not silly at all.

Lady Maria commented upon that fact to Miss Fox-Seton when they met in her bedroom late that night. Lady Maria liked to talk and be talked to for half an hour after the day was over, and Emily Fox-Seton's admiring interest in all she said she found at once stimulating and soothing. Her Ladyship was an old woman who indulged and inspired herself with an Epicurean wisdom. Though she would not have stupid people about her, she

did not always want very clever ones.

"They give me too much exercise," she said. "The epigrammatic ones keep me always jumping over fences. Besides, I like to make all the epigrams myself."

Emily Fox-Seton struck a happy mean, and she was a genuine admirer. She was intelligent enough not to spoil the point of an epigram when she repeated it, and she might be relied upon to repeat it and give all the glory to its originator. Lady Maria knew there were people who, hearing your good things, appropriated them without a scruple. To-night she said a number of good things to Emily in summing up her guests and their characteristics.

"Walderhurst has been to me three times when I made sure that he would not escape without a new marchioness attached to him. I should think he would take one to put an end to the annoyance of dangling unplucked upon the bough. A man in his position, if he has character enough to choose, can prevent even his wife's being a nuisance. He can give her a good house, hang the family diamonds on her, supply a decent elderly woman as a sort of lady-in-waiting and turn her into the paddock to kick up her heels within the limits of decorum. His own rooms can be sacred to him. He has his clubs and his personal interests. Husbands and wives annoy each other very little in these days. Married life has become comparatively decent."

"I should think his wife might be very happy," commented Emily. "He looks very kind."

"I don't know whether he is kind or not. It has never been necessary for me to borrow money from him."

Lady Maria was capable of saying odd things in her refined little drawling voice.

"He's more respectable than most men of his age. The diamonds are magnificent, and he not only has three superb places, but has money enough to keep them up. Now, there are three aspirants at Mallowe in the present party. Of course you can guess who they are, Emily?"

Emily Fox-Seton almost blushed. She felt a little indelicate.

"Lady Agatha would be very suitable," she said. "And Mrs. Ralph is very clever, of course. And Miss Brooke is really pretty."

Lady Maria gave vent to her small chuckle.

"Mrs. Ralph is the kind of woman who means business. She'll corner Walderhurst and talk literature and roll her eyes at him until he hates her. These writing women, who are intensely pleased with themselves, if they have some good looks into the bargain, believe themselves capable of marrying any one. Mrs. Ralph has fine eyes and rolls them.

Walderhurst won't be ogled. The Brooke girl is sharper than Ralph. She was very sharp this afternoon. She began at once."

"I--I didn't see her"--wondering.

"Yes, you did; but you didn't understand. The tennis, and the laughing with young Heriot on the terrace! She is going to be the piquant young woman who aggravates by indifference, and disdains rank and splendour; the kind of girl who has her innings in novelettes--but not out of them. The successful women are those who know how to toady in the right way and not obviously. Walderhurst has far too good an opinion of himself to be attracted by a girl who is making up to another man: he's not five-and-twenty."

Emily Fox-Seton was reminded, in spite of herself, of Mrs. Brooke's plaint: "Don't be too indifferent, Cora." She did not want to recall it exactly, because she thought the Brookes agreeable and would have preferred to think them disinterested. But, after all, she reflected, how natural that a girl who was so pretty should feel that the Marquis of Walderhurst represented prospects. Chiefly, however, she was filled with admiration at Lady Maria's cleverness.

"How wonderfully you observe everything, Lady Maria!" she exclaimed.

"How wonderfully!"

"I have had forty-seven seasons in London. That's a good many, you know.

Forty-seven seasons of débutantes and mothers tend toward enlightenment. Now there is Agatha Slade, poor girl! She's of a kind I know by heart. With birth and beauty, she is perfectly helpless. Her people are poor enough to be entitled to aid from the Charity Organisation, and they have had the indecency to present themselves with six daughters--six! All with delicate skins and delicate little noses and heavenly eyes. Most men can't afford them, and they can't afford most men. As soon as Agatha begins to go off a little, she will have to step aside, if she has not married. The others must be allowed their chance. Agatha has had the advertising of the illustrated papers this season, and she has gone well. In these days a new beauty is advertised like a new soap. They haven't given them sandwich-men in the streets, but that is about all that has been denied them. But Agatha has not had any special offer, and I know both she and her mother are a little frightened. Alix must come out next season, and they can't afford frocks for two. Agatha will have to be sent to their place in Ireland, and to be sent to Castle Clare is almost like being sent to the Bastille. She'll never get out alive. She'll have to stay there and see herself grow thin instead of slim, and colourless instead of fair. Her little nose will grow sharp, and she will lose her hair by degrees."

"Oh!" Emily Fox-Seton gave forth sympathetically. "What a pity that would be! I thought--I really thought--Lord Walderhurst seemed to admire her."

"Oh, every one admires her, for that matter; but if they go no further

that will not save her from the Bastille, poor thing. There, Emily; we must go to bed. We have talked enough."