

CHAPTER XVI

The interview which took place between Feather and Lord Coombe a few days later had its own special character.

"A governess will come here tomorrow at eleven o'clock," he said.
"She is a Mademoiselle Valle. She is accustomed to the educating of young children. She will present herself for your approval. Benby has done all the rest."

Feather flushed to her fine-spun ash-gold hair.

"What on earth can it matter!" she cried.

"It does not matter to you," he answered; "it chances--for the time being--to matter to ME."

"Chances!" she flamed forth--it was really a queer little flame of feeling. "That's it. You don't really care! It's a caprice--just because you see she is going to be pretty."

"I'll own," he admitted, "that has a great deal to do with it."

"It has everything to do with it," she threw out. "If she had a snub nose and thick legs you wouldn't care for her at all."

"I don't say that I do care for her," without emotion. "The situation interests me. Here is an extraordinary little being thrown into the world. She belongs to nobody. She will have to fight for her own hand. And she will have to FIGHT, by God! With that dewy lure in her eyes and her curved pomegranate mouth! She will not know, but she will draw disaster!"

"Then she had better not be taught anything at all," said Feather. "It would be an amusing thing to let her grow up without learning to read or write at all. I know numbers of men who would like the novelty of it. Girls who know so much are a bore."

"There are a few minor chances she ought to have," said Coombe. "A governess is one. Mademoiselle Valle will be here at eleven."

"I can't see that she promises to be such a beauty," fretted Feather. "She's the kind of good looking child who might grow up into a fat girl with staring black eyes like a barmaid."

"Occasionally pretty women do abhor their growing up daughters," commented Coombe letting his eyes rest on her interestedly.

"I don't abhor her," with pathos touched with venom. "But a big, lumping girl hanging about ogling and wanting to be ogled when she is passing through that silly age! And sometimes you speak to me as a man speaks to his wife when he is tired of her."

"I beg your pardon," Coombe said. "You make me feel like a person who lives over a shop at Knightsbridge, or in bijou mansion off Regent's Park."

But he was deeply aware that, as an outcome of the anomalous position he occupied, he not infrequently felt exactly this.

That a governess chosen by Coombe--though he would seem not to appear in the matter--would preside over the new rooms, Feather knew without a shadow of doubt.

A certain almost silent and always high-bred dominance over her existence she accepted as the inevitable, even while she fretted helplessly. Without him, she would be tossed, a broken butterfly, into the gutter. She knew her London. No one would pick her up unless to break her into smaller atoms and toss her away again. The freedom he allowed her after all was wonderful. It was because he disdained interference.

But there was a line not to be crossed--there must not even be an attempt at crossing it. Why he cared about that she did not know.

"You must be like Caesar's wife," he said rather grimly, after an interview in which he had given her a certain unsparing warning.

"And I am nobody's wife. What did Caesar's wife do?" she asked.

"Nothing." And he told her the story and, when she had heard him tell it, she understood certain things clearly.

Mademoiselle Valle was an intelligent, mature Frenchwoman. She presented herself to Mrs. Gareth-Lawless for inspection and, in ten minutes, realized that the power to inspect and sum up existed only on her own side. This pretty woman neither knew what inquiries to make nor cared for such replies as were given. Being swift to reason and practical in deduction, Mademoiselle Valle did not make the blunder of deciding that this light presence argued that she would be under no supervision more serious. The excellent Benby, one was made aware, acted and the excellent Benby, one was made aware, acted under clearly defined orders. Milord Coombe--among other things the best dressed and perhaps the least comprehended man in London--was concerned in this, though on what grounds practical persons could not explain to themselves. His connection with the narrow house on the right side of the right street was entirely comprehensible. The lenient felt nothing blatant or objectionable about it. Mademoiselle Valle herself was not disturbed by mere rumour. The education, manner and morals of the little girl she could account for. These alone were to be her affair, and she was competent to undertake their superintendence.

Therefore, she sat and listened with respectful intelligence to

the birdlike chatter of Mrs. Gareth-Lawless. (What a pretty woman!
The silhouette of a jeune fille!)

Mrs. Gareth-Lawless felt that, on her part, she had done all that
was required of her.

"I'm afraid she's rather a dull child, Mademoiselle," she said in
farewell. "You know children's ways and you'll understand what I
mean. She has a trick of staring and saying nothing. I confess I
wish she wasn't dull."

"It is impossible, madame, that she should be dull," said
Mademoiselle, with an agreeably implicating smile. "Oh, but quite
impossible! We shall see."

Not many days had passed before she had seen much. At the outset,
she recognized the effect of the little girl with the slender legs
and feet and the dozen or so of points which go to make a beauty.
The intense eyes first and the deeps of them. They gave one
furiously to think before making up one's mind. Then she noted the
perfection of the rooms added to the smartly inconvenient little
house. Where had the child lived before the addition had been
built? Thought and actual architectural genius only could have done
this. Light and even as much sunshine as London will vouchsafe,
had been arranged for. Comfort, convenience, luxury, had been
provided. Perfect colour and excellent texture had evoked actual

charm. Its utter unlikeness to the quarters London usually gives to children, even of the fortunate class, struck Mademoiselle Valle at once. Madame Gareth-Lawless had not done this. Who then, had?

The good Dowson she at once affiliated with. She knew the excellence of her type as it had revealed itself to her in the best peasant class. Trustworthy, simple, but of kindly, shrewd good sense and with the power to observe. Dowson was not a chatterer or given to gossip, but, as a silent observer, she would know many things and, in time, when they had become friendly enough to be fully aware that each might trust the other, gentle and careful talk would end in unconscious revelation being made by Dowson.

That the little girl was almost singularly attached to her nurse, she had marked early. There was something unusual in her manifestations of her feeling. The intense eyes followed the woman often, as if making sure of her presence and reality. The first day of Mademoiselle's residence in the place she saw the little thing suddenly stop playing with her doll and look at Dowson earnestly for several moments. Then she left her seat and went to the kind creature's side.

"I want to KISS you, Dowie," she said.

"To be sure, my lamb," answered Dowson, and, laying down her mending, she gave her a motherly hug. After which Robin went back

contentedly to her play.

The Frenchwoman thought it a pretty bit of childish affectionateness.

But it happened more than once during the day, and at night

Mademoiselle commented upon it.

"She has an affectionate heart, the little one," she remarked. "Madame, her mother, is so pretty and full of gaieties and pleasures that I should not have imagined she had much time for caresses and the nursery."

Even by this time Dowson had realized that with Mademoiselle she was upon safe ground and was in no danger of betraying herself to a gossip. She quietly laid down her sewing and looked at her companion with grave eyes.

"Her mother has never kissed her in her life that I am aware of," she said.

"Has never--!" Mademoiselle ejaculated. "Never!"

"Just as you see her, she is, Mademoiselle," Dowson said. "Any sensible woman would know, when she heard her talk about her child. I found it all out bit by bit when first I came here. I'm going to talk plain and have done with it. Her first six years she spent in a sort of dog kennel on the top floor of this house.

No sun, no real fresh air. Two little holes that were dingy and gloomy to dull a child's senses. Not a toy or a bit of colour or a picture, but clothes fine enough for Buckingham Palace children--and enough for six. Fed and washed and taken out every day to be shown off. And a bad nurse, Miss--a bad one that kept her quiet by pinching her black and blue."

"Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu! That little angel!" cried Mademoiselle, covering her eyes.

Dowson hastily wiped her own eyes. She had shed many a motherly tear over the child. It was a relief to her to open her heart to a sympathizer.

"Black and blue!" she repeated. "And laughing and dancing and all sorts of fast fun going on in the drawing-rooms." She put out her hand and touched Mademoiselle's arm quite fiercely. "The little thing didn't know she HAD a mother! She didn't know what the word meant. I found that out by her innocent talk. She used to call HER 'The Lady Downstairs'."

"Mon Dieu!" cried the Frenchwoman again. "What a woman!"

"She first heard of mothers from a little boy she met in the Square Gardens. He was the first child she had been allowed to play with. He was a nice child and he had a good mother. I only got it bit

by bit when she didn't know how much she was telling me. He told her about mothers and he kissed her--for the first time in her life. She didn't understand but it warmed her little heart. She's never forgotten."

Mademoiselle even started slightly in her chair. Being a clever Frenchwoman she felt drama and all its subtle accompaniments.

"Is that why----" she began.

"It is," answered Dowson, stoutly. "A kiss isn't an ordinary thing to her. It means something wonderful. She's got into the way of loving me, bless her, and every now and then, it's my opinion, she suddenly remembers her lonely days when she didn't know what love was. And it just wells up in her little heart and she wants to kiss me. She always says it that way, 'Dowie, I want to KISS you,' as if it was something strange and, so to say, sacred. She doesn't know it means almost nothing to most people. That's why I always lay down my work and hug her close."

"You have a good heart--a GOOD one!" said Mademoiselle with strong feeling.

Then she put a question:

"Who was the little boy?"

"He was a relation of--his lordship's."

"His lordship's?" cautiously.

"The Marquis. Lord Coombe."

There was a few minutes' silence. Both women were thinking of a number of things and each was asking herself how much it would be wise to say.

It was Dowson who made her decision first, and this time, as before, she laid down her work. What she had to convey was the thing which, above all others, the Frenchwoman must understand if she was to be able to use her power to its best effect.

"A woman in my place hears enough talk," was her beginning. "Servants are given to it. The Servants' Hall is their theatre. It doesn't matter whether tales are true or not, so that they're spicy. But it's been my way to credit just as much as I see and know and to say little about that. If a woman takes a place in a house, let her go or stay as suits her best, but don't let her stay and either complain or gossip. My business here is Miss Robin, and I've found out for myself that there's just one person that, in a queer, unfeeling way of his own, has a fancy for looking after her. I say 'unfeeling' because he never shows any human signs of caring

for the child himself. But if there's a thing that ought to be done for her and a body can contrive to let him know it's needed, it'll be done. Downstairs' talk that I've seemed to pay no attention to has let out that it was him that walked quietly upstairs to the Nursery, where he'd never set foot before, and opened the door on Andrews pinching the child. She packed her box and left that night. He inspected the nurseries and, in a few days, an architect was planning these rooms,--for Miss Robin and for no one else, though there was others wanted them. It was him that told me to order her books and playthings--and not let her know it because she hates him. It was him I told she needed a governess. And he found you."

Mademoiselle Valle had listened with profound attention. Here she spoke.

"You say continually 'he' or 'him'. He is--?"

"Lord Coombe. I'm not saying I've seen much of him. Considering--" Dowson paused--"it's queer how seldom he comes here. He goes abroad a good deal. He's mixed up with the highest and it's said he's in favour because he's satirical and clever. He's one that's gossiped about and he cares nothing for what's said. What business of mine is it whether or not he has all sorts of dens on the Continent where he goes to racket. He might be a bishop for all I see. And he's the only creature in this world of the Almighty's

that remembers that child's a human being. Just him--Lord Coombe. There, Mademoiselle,--I've said a good deal."

More and more interestedly had the Frenchwoman listened and with an increasing hint of curiosity in her intelligent eyes. She pressed Dowson's needle-roughened fingers warmly.

"You have not said too much. It is well that I should know this of this gentleman. As you say, he is a man who is much discussed. I myself have heard much of him--but of things connected with another part of his character. It is true that he is in favour with great personages. It is because they are aware that he has observed much for many years. He is light and ironic, but he tells truths which sometimes startle those who hear them."

"Jennings tells below stairs that he says things it's queer for a lord to say. Jennings is a sharp young snip and likes to pick up things to repeat. He believes that his lordship's idea is that there's a time coming when the high ones will lose their places and thrones and kings will be done away with. I wouldn't like to go that far myself," said Dowson, gravely, "but I must say that there's not that serious respect paid to Royalty that there was in my young days. My word! When Queen Victoria was in her prime, with all her young family around her,--their little Royal Highnesses that were princes in their Highland kilts and the princesses in their crinolines and hats with drooping ostrich feathers and

broad satin streamers--the people just went wild when she went to a place to unveil anything!"

"When the Empress Eugenie and the Prince Imperial appeared, it was the same thing," said Mademoiselle, a trifle sadly. "One recalls it now as a dream passed away--the Champs Elysees in the afternoon sunlight--the imperial carriage and the glittering escort trotting gaily--the beautiful woman with the always beautiful costumes--her charming smile--the Emperor, with his waxed moustache and saturnine face! It meant so much and it went so quickly. One moment," she made a little gesture, "and it is gone--forever! An Empire and all the splendour of it! Two centuries ago it could not have disappeared so quickly. But now the world is older. It does not need toys so much. A Republic is the people--and there are more people than kings."

"It's things like that that his lordship says, according to Jennings," said Dowson. "Jennings is never quite sure he's in earnest. He has a satirical way--And the company always laugh."

Mademoiselle had spoken thoughtfully and as if half to her inner self instead of to Dowson. She added something even more thoughtfully now.

"The same kind of people laughed before the French Revolution," she murmured.

"I'm not scholar enough to know much about that--that was a long time ago, wasn't it?" Dowson remarked.

"A long time ago," said Mademoiselle.

Dowson's reply was quite free from tragic reminiscence.

"Well, I must say, I like a respectable Royal Family myself," she observed. "There's something solid and comfortable about it--besides the coronations and weddings and procession with all the pictures in the Illustrated London News. Give me a nice, well-behaved Royal Family."