CHAPTER XIX

Mademoiselle Valle and Dowson together realized that after this the growing up process was more rapid. It always seems incredibly rapid to lookers on, after thirteen. But these two watchers felt that, in Robin's case, it seemed unusually so. Robin had always been interested in her studies and clever at them, but, suddenly, she developed a new concentration and it was of an order which her governess felt denoted the secret holding of some object in view. She devoted herself to her lessons with a quality of determination which was new. She had previously been absorbed, but not determined. She made amazing strides and seemed to aspire to a thoroughness and perfection girls did not commonly aim at--especially at the frequently rather preoccupied hour of blossoming. Mademoiselle encountered in her an eagerness that she--who knew girls--would have felt it optimistic to expect in most cases. She wanted to work over hours; she would have read too much if she had not been watched and gently coerced.

She was not distracted by the society of young people of her own age. She, indeed, showed a definite desire to avoid such companionship. What she said to Mademoiselle Valle one afternoon during a long walk they took together, held its own revelation for the older woman.

They had come upon the two Erwyns walking with their attendant

in Kensington Gardens, and, seeing them at some distance, Robin asked her companion to turn into another walk.

"I don't want to meet them," she said, hurriedly. "I don't think I like girls. Perhaps it's horrid of me--but I don't. I don't like those two." A few minutes later, after they had walked in an opposite direction, she said thoughtfully.

"Perhaps the kind of girls I should like to know would not like to know me."

From the earliest days of her knowledge of Lord Coombe, Mademoiselle Valle had seen that she had no cause to fear lack of comprehension on his part. With a perfection of method, they searched each other's intelligence. It had become understood that on such occasions as there was anything she wished to communicate or inquire concerning, Mr. Benby, in his private room, was at Mademoiselle's service, and there his lordship could also be met personally by appointment.

"There have been no explanations," Mademoiselle Valle said to Dowson. "He does not ask to know why I turn to him and I do not ask to know why he cares about this particular child. It is taken for granted that is his affair and not mine. I am paid well to take care of Robin, and he knows that all I say and do is part of my taking care of her."

After the visit of the Erwyn children, she had a brief interview with Coombe, in which she made for him a clear sketch. It was a sketch of unpleasant little minds, avid and curious on somewhat exotic subjects, little minds, awake to rather common claptrap and gossipy pinchbeck interests.

"Yes--unpleasant, luckless, little persons. I quite understand. They never appeared before. They will not appear again. Thank you, Mademoiselle," he said.

The little girls did not appear again; neither did any others of their type, and the fact that Feather knew little of other types was a sufficient reason for Robin's growing up without companions of her own age.

"She's a lonely child, after all," Mademoiselle said.

"She always was," answered Dowie. "But she's fond of us, bless her heart, and it isn't loneliness like it was before we came."

"She is not unhappy. She is too blooming and full of life," Mademoiselle reflected. "We adore her and she has many interests. It is only that she does not know the companionship most young people enjoy. Perhaps, as she has never known it, she does not miss it."

The truth was that if the absence of intercourse with youth produced its subtle effect on her, she was not aware of any lack, and a certain uncompanioned habit of mind, which gave her much time for dreams and thought, was accepted by her as a natural condition as simply as her babyhood had accepted the limitations of the Day and Night Nurseries.

She was not a self-conscious creature, but the time came when she became rather disturbed by the fact that people looked at her very often, as she walked in the streets. Sometimes they turned their heads to look after her; occasionally one person walking with another would say something quietly to his or her companion, and they even paused a moment to turn quite round and look. The first few times she noticed this she flushed prettily and said nothing to Mademoiselle Valle who was generally with her. But, after her attention had been attracted by the same thing on several different days, she said uneasily:

"Am I quite tidy, Mademoiselle?"

"Quite," Mademoiselle answered--just a shade uneasy herself.

"I began to think that perhaps something had come undone or my hat was crooked," she explained. "Those two women stared so. Then two men in a hansom leaned forward and one said something to the other, and they both laughed a little, Mademoiselle!" hurriedly,

"Now, there are three young men!" quite indignantly. "Don't let them see you notice them--but I think it RUDE!"

They were carelessly joyous and not strictly well-bred youths, who were taking a holiday together, and their rudeness was quite unintentional and without guile. They merely stared and obviously muttered comments to each other as they passed, each giving the hasty, unconscious touch to his young moustache, which is the automatic sign of pleasurable observation in the human male.

"If she had had companions of her own age she would have known all about it long ago," Mademoiselle was thinking.

Her intelligent view of such circumstances was that the simple fact they arose from could--with perfect taste--only be treated simply. It was a mere fact; therefore, why be prudish and affected about it.

"They did not intend any rudeness," she said, after they had gone by. "They are not much more than boys and not perfectly behaved. People often stare when they see a very pretty girl. I am afraid I do it myself. You are very pretty," quite calmly, and as one speaking without prejudice.

Robin turned and looked at her, and the colour, which was like a Jacqueminot rose, flooded her face. She was at the flushing age.

Her gaze was interested, speculative, and a shade startled--merely a shade.

"Oh," she said briefly--not in exclamation exactly, but in a sort of acceptance. Then she looked straight before her and went on walking, with the lovely, slightly swaying, buoyant step which in itself drew attracted eyes after her.

"If I were a model governess, such as one read of long before you were born," Mademoiselle Valle continued, "I should feel it my duty to tell you that beauty counts for nothing. But that is nonsense. It counts a great deal--with some women it counts for everything. Such women are not lucky. One should thank Heaven for it and make the best of it, without exaggerated anxiety. Both Dowie and I, who love you, are GRATEFUL to le bon Dieu that you are pretty."

"I have sometimes thought I was pretty, when I saw myself in the glass," said Robin, with unexcited interest. "It seemed to me that I LOOKED pretty. But, at the same time, I couldn't help knowing that everything is a matter of taste and that it might be because I was conceited."

"You are not conceited," answered the Frenchwoman.

"I don't want to be," said Robin. "I want to be--a serious person

with--with a strong character."

Mademoiselle's smile was touched with affectionate doubt. It had not occurred to her to view this lovely thing in the light of a "strong" character. Though, after all, what exactly was strength? She was a warm, intensely loving, love compelling, tender being. Having seen much of the world, and of humanity and inhumanity, Mademoiselle Valle had had moments of being afraid for her--particularly when, by chance, she recalled the story Dowson had told her of the bits of crushed and broken leaves.

"A serious person," she said, "and strong?"

"Because I must earn my own living," said Robin. "I must be strong enough to take care of myself. I am going to be a governess--or something."

Here, it was revealed to Mademoiselle as in a flash, was the reason why she had applied herself with determination to her studies. This had been the object in view. For reasons of her own, she intended to earn her living. With touched interest, Mademoiselle Valle waited, wondering if she would be frank about the reason. She merely said aloud:

"A governess?"

"Perhaps there may be something else I can do. I might be a secretary or something like that. Girls and women are beginning to do so many new things," her charge explained herself. "I do not want to be--supported and given money. I mean I do not want--other people--to buy my clothes and food--and things. The newspapers are full of advertisements. I could teach children. I could translate business letters. Very soon I shall be old enough to begin. Girls in their teens do it."

She had laid some of her cards on the table, but not all, poor child. She was not going into the matter of her really impelling reasons. But Mademoiselle Valle was not dull, and her affection added keenness to her mental observations. Also she had naturally heard the story of the Thorpe lawsuit from Dowson. Inevitably several points suggested themselves to her.

"Mrs. Gareth-Lawless----" she began, reasonably.

But Robin stopped her by turning her face full upon her once more, and this time her eyes were full of clear significance.

"She will let me go," she said. "You KNOW she will let me go, Mademoiselle, darling. You KNOW she will." There was a frank comprehension and finality in the words which made a full revelation of facts Mademoiselle herself had disliked even to allow to form themselves into thoughts. The child knew all sorts of things and

felt all sorts of things. She would probably never go into details, but she was extraordinarily, harrowingly, AWARE. She had been learning to be aware for years. This had been the secret she had always kept to herself.

"If you are planning this," Mademoiselle said, as reasonably as before, "we must work very seriously for the news few years."

"How long do you think it will take?" asked Robin. She was nearing sixteen--bursting into glowing blossom--a radiant, touching thing whom one only could visualize in flowering gardens, in charming, enclosing rooms, figuratively embraced by every mature and kind arm within reach of her. This presented itself before Mademoiselle Valle with such vividness that it was necessary for her to control a sigh.

"When I feel that you are ready, I will tell you," she answered. "And I will do all I can to help you--before I leave you."

"Oh!" Robin gasped, in an involuntarily childish way, "I--hadn't thought of that! How could I LIVE without you--and Dowie?"

"I know you had not thought of it," said Mademoiselle, affectionately. "You are only a dear child yet. But that will be part of it, you know. A governess or a secretary, or a young lady in an office translating letters cannot take her governess and maid with her."

"Oh!" said Robin again, and her eyes became suddenly so dewy that the person who passed her at the moment thought he had never seen such wonderful eyes in his life. So much of her was still child that the shock of this sudden practical realization thrust the mature and determined part of her being momentarily into the background, and she could scarcely bear her alarmed pain. It was true that she had been too young to face her plan as she must.

But, after the long walk was over and she found herself in her bedroom again, she was conscious of a sense of being relieved of a burden. She had been wondering when she could tell Mademoiselle and Dowie of her determination. She had not liked to keep it a secret from them as if she did not love them, but it had been difficult to think of a way in which to begin without seeming as if she thought she was quite grown up--which would have been silly. She had not thought of speaking today, but it had all come about quite naturally, as a result of Mademoiselle's having told her that she was really very pretty--so pretty that it made people turn to look at her in the street. She had heard of girls and women who were like that, but she had never thought it possible that she----! She had, of course, been looked at when she was very little, but she had heard Andrews say that people looked because she had so much hair and it was like curled silk.

She went to the dressing table and looked at herself in the glass,

leaning forward that she might see herself closely. The face which drew nearer and nearer had the effect of some tropic flower, because it was so alive with colour which seemed to palpitate instead of standing still. Her soft mouth was warm and brilliant with it, and the darkness of her eyes was--as it had always been--like dew. Her brow were a slender black velvet line, and her lashes made a thick, softening shadow. She saw they were becoming. She cupped her round chin in her hands and studied herself with a desire to be sure of the truth without prejudice or self conceit. The whole effect of her was glowing, and she felt the glow as others did. She put up a finger to touch the velvet petal texture of her skin, and she saw how prettily pointed and slim her hand was. Yes, that was pretty--and her hair--the way it grew about her forehead and ears and the back of her neck. She gazed at her young curve and colour and flame of life's first beauty with deep curiosity, singularly impersonal for her years.

She liked it; she began to be grateful as Mademoiselle had said she and Dowie were. Yes, if other people liked it, there was no use in pretending it would not count.

"If I am going to earn my living," she thought, with entire gravity, "it may be good for me. If I am a governess, it will be useful because children like pretty people. And if I am a secretary and work in an office, I daresay men like one to be pretty because it is more cheerful."

She mentioned this to Mademoiselle Valle, who was very kind about it, though she looked thoughtful afterwards. When, a few days later, Mademoiselle had an interview with Coombe in Benby's comfortable room, he appeared thoughtful also as he listened to her recital of the incidents of the long walk during which her charge had revealed her future plans.

"She is a nice child," he said. "I wish she did not dislike me so much. I understand her, villain as she thinks me. I am not a genuine villain," he added, with his cold smile. But he was saying it to himself, not to Mademoiselle.

This, she saw, but--singularly, perhaps--she spoke as if in reply.

"Of that I am aware."

He turned his head slightly, with a quick, unprepared movement.

"Yes?" he said.

"Would your lordship pardon me if I should say that otherwise I should not ask your advice concerning a very young girl?"

He slightly waved his hand.

"I should have known that--if I had thought of it. I do know it."

Mademoiselle Valle bowed.

"The fact," she said, "that she seriously thinks that perhaps beauty may be an advantage to a young person who applies for work in the office of a man of business because it may seem bright and cheerful to him when he is tired and out of spirits--that gives one furiously to think. Yes, to me she said it, milord--with the eyes of a little dove brooding over her young. I could see her--lifting them like an angel to some elderly vaurien, who would merely think her a born cocotte."

Here Coombe's rigid face showed thought indeed.

"Good God!" he muttered, quite to himself, "Good God!" in a low, breathless voice. Villain or saint, he knew not one world but many.

"We must take care of her," he said next. "She is not an insubordinate child. She will do nothing yet?"

"I have told her she is not yet ready," Mademoiselle Valle answered. "I have also promised to tell her when she is--And to help her."

"God help her if we do not!" he said. "She is, on the whole, as

ignorant as a little sheep--and butchers are on the lookout for such as she is. They suit them even better than the little things whose tendencies are perverse from birth. An old man with an evil character may be able to watch over her from a distance."

Mademoiselle regarded him with grave eyes, which took in his tall, thin erectness of figure, his bearing, the perfection of his attire with its unfailing freshness, which was not newness.

"Do you call yourself an old man, milord?" she asked.

"I am not decrepit--years need not bring that," was his answer. "But I believe I became an old man before I was thirty. I have grown no older--in that which is really age--since then."

In the moment's silence which followed, his glance met Mademoiselle Valle's and fixed itself.

"I am not old enough--or young enough--to be enamoured of Mrs. Gareth-Lawless' little daughter," he said. "YOU need not be told that. But you have heard that there are those who amuse themselves by choosing to believe that I am."

"A few light and not too clean-minded fools," she admitted without flinching.

"No man can do worse for himself than to explain and deny," he responded with a smile at once hard and fine. "Let them continue to believe it."