

CHAPTER XXVI

As a result of this, her grace saw Mademoiselle Valle alone a few mornings later and talked to her long and quietly. Their comprehension of each other was complete. Before their interview was at an end the Duchess' interest in the adventure she was about to enter into had become profound.

"The sooner she is surrounded by a new atmosphere, the better," was one of the things the Frenchwoman had said. "The prospect of an arrangement so perfect and so secure fills me with the profoundest gratitude. It is absolutely necessary that I return to my parents in Belgium. They are old and failing in health and need me greatly. I have been sad and anxious for months because I felt that it would be wickedness to desert this poor child. I have been torn in two. Now I can be at peace--thank the good God."

"Bring her to me tomorrow if possible," the Duchess said when they parted. "I foresee that I may have something to overcome in the fact that I am Lord Coombe's old friend, but I hope to be able to overcome it."

"She is a baby--she is of great beauty--she has a passionate little soul of which she knows nothing." Mademoiselle Valle said it with an anxious reflectiveness. "I have been afraid. If I were her mother----" her eyes sought those of the older woman.

"But she has no mother," her grace answered. Her own eyes were serious. She knew something of girls, of young things, of the rush and tumult of young life in them and of the outlet it demanded. A baby who was of great beauty and of a passionate soul was no trivial undertaking for a rheumatic old duchess, but--"Bring her to me," she said.

So was Robin brought to the tall Early Victorian mansion in the belatedly stately square. And the chief thought in her mind was that though mere good manners demanded under the circumstances that she should come to see the Dowager Duchess of Darte and be seen by her, if she found that she was like Lord Coombe, she would not be able to endure the prospect of a future spent in her service howsoever desirable such service might outwardly appear. This desirableness Mademoiselle Valle had made clear to her. She was to be the companion of a personage of great and mature charm and grace who desired not mere attendance, but something more, which something included the warmth and fresh brightness of happy youth and bloom. She would do for her employer the things a young relative might do. She would have a suite of rooms of her own and a freedom as to hours and actions which greater experience on her part would have taught was not the customary portion meted out to a paid companion. But she knew nothing of paid service and a preliminary talk of Coombe's with Mademoiselle Valle had warned her against allowing any suspicion that this "earning a living"

had been too obviously ameliorated.

"Her life is unusual. She herself is unusual in a most dignified and beautiful way. You will, it might almost be said, hold the position of a young lady in waiting," was Mademoiselle's gracefully put explanation.

When, after they had been ushered into the room where her grace sat in her beautiful and mellow corner by the fire, Robin advanced towards the highbacked chair, what the old woman was chiefly conscious of was the eyes which seemed all lustrous iris. There was uncommon appeal and fear in them. The blackness of their setting of up-curved lashes made them look babyishly wide.

"Mademoiselle Valle has told me of your wish to take a position as companion," the Duchess said after they were seated.

"I want very much," said Robin, "to support myself and Mademoiselle thinks that I might fill such a place if I am not considered too young."

"You are not too young--for me. I want something young to come and befriend me. Am I too old for YOU?" Her smile had been celebrated fifty years earlier and it had not changed. A smile does not. She was not like Lord Coombe in any degree however remote. She did not belong to his world, Robin thought.

"If I can do well enough the things you require done," she answered blushing her Jacqueminot rose blush, "I shall be grateful if you will let me try to do them. Mademoiselle will tell you that I have no experience, but that I am one who tries well."

"Mademoiselle has answered all my questions concerning your qualifications so satisfactorily that I need ask you very few."

Such questions as she asked were not of the order Robin had expected. She led her into talk and drew Mademoiselle Valle into the conversation. It was talk which included personal views of books, old gardens and old houses, people, pictures and even--lightly--politics. Robin found herself quite incidentally, as it were, reading aloud to her an Italian poem. She ceased to be afraid and was at ease. She forgot Lord Coombe. The Duchess listening and watching her warmed to her task of delicate investigation and saw reason for anticipating agreeably stimulating things. She was not taking upon herself a merely benevolent duty which might assume weight and become a fatigue. In fact she might trust Coombe for that. After all it was he who had virtually educated the child--little as she was aware of the singular fact. It was he who had dragged her forth from her dog kennel of a top floor nursery and quaintly incongruous as it seemed, had found her a respectable woman for a nurse and an intelligent person for a governess and companion as if he had been a domesticated middle class widower with a little

girl to play mother to. She saw in the situation more than others would have seen in it, but she saw also the ironic humour of it. Coombe--with the renowned cut of his overcoat--the perfection of his line and scarcely to be divined suggestions of hue--Coombe!

She did not avoid all mention of his name during the interview, but she spoke of him only casually, and though the salary she offered was an excellent one, it was not inordinate. Robin could not feel that she was not being accepted as of the class of young persons who support themselves self-respectingly, though even the most modest earned income would have represented wealth to her ignorance.

Before they parted she had obtained the position so pleasantly described by Mademoiselle Valle as being something like that of a young lady in waiting. "But I am really a companion and I will do everything--everything I can so that I shall be worth keeping," she thought seriously. She felt that she should want to be kept. If Lord Coombe was a friend of her employer's it was because the Duchess did not know what others knew. And her house was not his house--and the hideous thing she had secretly loathed would be at an end. She would be supporting herself as decently and honestly as Mademoiselle or Dowie had supported themselves all their lives.

With an air of incidentally recalling a fact, the Duchess said after they had risen to leave her:

"Mademoiselle Valle tells me you have an elderly nurse you are very fond of. She seems to belong to a class of servants almost extinct."

"I love her," Robin faltered--because the sudden reminder brought back a pang to her. There was a look in her eyes which faltered also. "She loves me. I don't know how----" but there she stopped.

"Such women are very valuable to those who know the meaning of their type. I myself am always in search of it. My dear Miss Brent was of it, though of a different class."

"But most people do not know," said Robin. "It seems old-fashioned to them--and it's beautiful! Dowie is an angel."

"I should like to secure your Dowie for my housekeeper and myself,"--one of the greatest powers of the celebrated smile was its power to convince. "A competent person is needed to take charge of the linen. If we can secure an angel we shall be fortunate."

A day or so later she said to Coombe in describing the visit.

"The child's face is wonderful. If you could but have seen her eyes when I said it. It is not the mere beauty of size and shape and colour which affect one. It is something else. She is a little flame of feeling."

The "something else" was in the sound of her voice as she answered.

"She will be in the same house with me! Sometimes perhaps I may see her and talk to her! Oh! how GRATEFUL I am!" She might even see and talk to her as often as she wished, it revealed itself and when she and Mademoiselle got into their hansom cab to drive away, she caught at the Frenchwoman's hand and clung to it, her eyelashes wet,

"It is as if there MUST be Goodness which takes care of one," she said. "I used to believe in it so--until I was afraid of all the world. Dowie means most of all. I did now know how I could bear to let her go away. And since her husband and her daughter died, she has no one but me. I should have had no one but her if you had gone back to Belgium, Mademoiselle. And now she will be safe in the same house with me. Perhaps the Duchess will keep her until she dies. I hope she will keep me until I die. I will be as good and faithful as Dowie and perhaps the Duchess will live until I am quite old--and not pretty any more. And I will make economies as you have made them, Mademoiselle, and save all my salary--and I might be able to end my days in a little cottage in the country."

Mademoiselle was conscious of an actual physical drag at her heartstrings. The pulsating glow of her young loveliness had never been more moving and oh! the sublime certainty of her unconsciousness

that Life lay between this hour and that day when she was "quite old and not pretty any more" and having made economies could die in a little cottage in the country! She believed in her vision as she had believed that Donal would come to her in the garden.

Upon Feather the revelation that her daughter had elected to join the ranks of girls who were mysteriously determined to be responsible for themselves produced a curious combination of effects. It was presented to her by Lord Coombe in the form of a simple impersonal statement which had its air of needing no explanation. She heard it with eyes widening a little and a smile slowly growing. Having heard, she broke into a laugh, a rather high-pitched treble laugh.

"Really?" she said. "She is really going to do it? To take a situation! She wants to be independent and 'live her own life!' What a joke--for a girl of mine!" She was either really amused or chose to seem so.

"What do YOU think of it?" she asked when she stopped laughing. Her eyes had curiosity in them.

"I like it," he answered.

"Of course. I ought to have remembered that you helped her to an Early Victorian duchess. She's one without a flaw--the Dowager

Duchess of Dart. The most conscientiously careful mother couldn't object. It's almost like entering into the kingdom of heaven--in a dull way." She began to laugh again as if amusing images rose suddenly before her. "And what does the Duchess think of it?" she said after her laughter had ceased again. "How does she reconcile herself to the idea of a companion whose mother she wouldn't have in her house?"

"We need not enter into that view of the case. You decided some years ago that it did not matter to you whether Early Victorian duchesses included you in their visiting lists or did not. More modern ones do I believe--quite beautiful and amusing ones."

"But for that reason I want this one and those like her. They would bore me, but I want them. I want them to come to my house and be polite to me in their stuffy way. I want to be invited to their hideous dinner parties and see them sitting round their tables in their awful family jewels 'talking of the sad deaths of kings.' That's Shakespeare, you know. I heard it last night at the theatre."

"Why do you want it?" Coombe inquired.

"When I ask you why you show your morbid interest in Robin, you say you don't know. I don't know--but I do want it."

She suddenly flushed, she even showed her small teeth. For an

extraordinary moment she looked like a little cat.

"Robin will hare it," she cried, grinding a delicate fist into the palm on her knee. "She's not eighteen and she's a beauty and she's taken up by a perfectly decent old duchess. She'll have EVERYTHING! The Dowager will marry her to someone important. You'll help," she turned on him in a flame of temper. "You are capable of marrying her yourself!" There was a a brief but entire silence. It was broken by his saying,

"She is not capable of marrying ME."

There was brief but entire silence again, and it was he who again broke it, his manner at once cool and reasonable.

"It is better not to exhibit this kind of feeling. Let us be quite frank. There are few things you feel more strongly than that you do not want your daughter in the house. When she was a child you told me that you detested the prospect of having her on your hands. She is being disposed of in the most easily explained and enviable manner."

"It's true--it's true," Feather murmured. She began to see advantages and the look of a little cat died out, or at least modified itself into that of a little cat upon whom dawned prospects of cream. No mood ever held her very long. "She won't come back to stay," she

said. "The Duchess won't let her. I can use her rooms and I shall be very glad to have them. There's at least some advantage in figuring as a sort of Dame Aux Camelias."