

CHAPTER XXVII

The night before Robin went away as she sat alone in the dimness of one light, thinking as girls nearly always sit and think on the eve of a change, because to youth any change seems to mean the final closing as well as the opening of ways, the door of her room was opened and an exquisite and nymphlike figure in pale green stood exactly where the rays of the reading lamp seemed to concentrate themselves in an effort to reveal most purely its delicately startling effect. It was her mother in a dress whose spring-like tint made her a sort of slim dryad. She looked so pretty and young that Robin caught her breath as she rose and went forward.

"It is your aged parent come to give you her blessing," said Feather.

"I was wondering if I might come to your room in the morning," Robin answered.

Feather seated herself lightly. She was not intelligent enough to have any real comprehension of the mood which had impelled her to come. She had merely given way to a secret sense of resentment of something which annoyed her. She knew, however, why she had put on the spring-leaf green dress which made her look like a girl. She was not going to let Robin feel as if she were receiving a visit from her grandmother. She had got that far.

"We don't know each other at all, do we?" she said.

"No," answered Robin. She could not remove her eyes from her loveliness. She brought up such memories of the Lady Downstairs and the desolate child in the shabby nursery.

"Mothers are not as intimate with their daughters as they used to be when it was a sort of virtuous fashion to superintend their rice pudding and lecture them about their lessons. We have not seen each other often."

"No," said Robin.

Feather's laugh had again the rather high note Coombe had noticed.

"You haven't very much to say, have you?" she commented. "And you stare at me as if you were trying to explain me. I dare say you know that you have big eyes and that they're a good colour, but I may as well hint to you that men do not like to be stared at as if their deeps were being searched. Drop your eyelids."

Robin's lids dropped in spite of herself because she was startled, but immediately she was startled again by a note in her mother's voice--a note of added irritation.

"Don't make a habit of dropping them too often," it broke out, "or it will look as if you did it to show your eyelashes. Girls with tricks of that sort are always laughed at. Alison Carr LIVES sideways because she has a pretty profile."

Coombe would have recognized the little cat look, if he had been watching her as she leaned back in her chair and scrutinized her daughter. The fact was that she took in her every point, being an astute censor of other women's charms.

"Stand up," she said.

Robin stood up because she could not well refuse to do so, but she coloured because she was suddenly ashamed.

"You're not little, but you're not tall," her mother said. "That's against you. It's the fashion for women to be immensely tall now. Du Maurier's pictures in Punch and his idiotic Trilby did it. Clothes are made for giantesses. I don't care about it myself, but a girl's rather out of it if she's much less than six feet high. You can sit down."

A more singular interview between mother and daughter had assuredly rarely taken place. As she looked at the girl her resentment of her increased each moment. She actually felt as if she were beginning to lose her temper.

"You are what pious people call 'going out into the world'," she went on. "In moral books mothers always give advice and warnings to their girls when they're leaving them. I can give you some warnings. You think that because you have been taken up by a dowager duchess everything will be plain sailing. You're mistaken. You think because you are eighteen and pretty, men will fall at your feet."

"I would rather be hideous," cried suddenly passionate Robin. "I HATE men!"

The silly pretty thing who was responsible for her being, grew sillier as her irritation increased.

"That's what girls always pretend, but the youngest little idiot knows it isn't true. It's men who count. It makes me laugh when I think of them--and of you. You know nothing about them and they know everything about you. A clever man can do anything he pleases with a silly girl."

"Are they ALL bad?" Robin exclaimed furiously.

"They're none of them bad. They're only men. And that's my warning. Don't imagine that when they make love to you they do it as if you were the old Duchess' granddaughter. You will only be her paid

companion and that's a different matter."

"I will not speak to one of them----" Robin actually began.

"You'll be obliged to do what the Duchess tells you to do," laughed Feather, as she realized her obvious power to dull the glitter and glow of things which she had felt the girl must be dazzled and uplifted unduly by. She was rather like a spiteful schoolgirl entertaining herself by spoiling an envied holiday for a companion.

"Old men will run after you and you will have to be nice to them whether you like it or not." A queer light came into her eyes.

"Lord Coombe is fond of girls just out of the schoolroom. But if he begins to make love to you don't allow yourself to feel too much flattered."

Robin sprang toward her.

"Do you think I don't ABHOR Lord Coombe!" she cried out forgetting herself in the desperate cruelty of the moment. "Haven't I reason----" but there she remembered and stopped.

But Feather was not shocked or alarmed. Years of looking things in the face had provided her with a mental surface from which tilings rebounded. On the whole it even amused her and "suited her book" that Robin should take this tone.

"Oh! I suppose you mean you know he admires me and pays bills for me. Where would you have been if he hadn't done it? He's been a sort of benefactor."

"I know nothing but that even when I was a little child I could not bear to touch his hand!" cried Robin. Then Feather remembered several things she had almost forgotten and she was still more entertained.

"I believe you've not forgotten through all these years that the boy you fell so indecently in love with was taken away by his mother because Lord Coombe was YOUR mother's admirer and he was such a sinner that even a baby was contaminated by him! Donal Muir is a young man by this time. I wonder what his mother would do now if he turned up at your mistress' house--that's what she is, you know, your mistress--and began to make love to you." She laughed outright. "You'll get into all sorts of messes, but that would be the nicest one!"

Robin could only stand and gaze at her. Her moment's fire had died down. Without warning, out of the past a wave rose and overwhelmed her then and there. It bore with it the wild woe of the morning when a child had waited in the spring sun and her world had fallen into nothingness. It came back--the broken-hearted anguish, the utter helpless desolation, as if she stood in the midst of it again, as if it had never passed. It was a re-incarnation. She

could not bear it.

"Do you hate me--as I hate Lord Coombe?" she cried out. "Do you WANT unhappy things to happen to me? Oh! Mother, why!" She had never said "Mother" before. Nature said it for her here. The piteous appeal of her youth and lonely young rush of tears was almost intolerably sweet. Through some subtle cause it added to the thing in her which Feather resented and longed to trouble and to hurt.

"You are a spiteful little cat!" she sprang up to exclaim, standing close and face to face with her. "You think I am an old thing and that I'm jealous of you! Because you're pretty and a girl you think women past thirty don't count. You'll find out. Mrs. Muir will count and she's forty if she's a day. Her son's such a beauty that people go mad over him. And he worships her--and he's her slave. I wish you WOULD get into some mess you couldn't get out of! Don't come to me if you do."

The wide beauty of Robin's gaze and her tear wet bloom were too much. Feather was quite close to her. The spiteful schoolgirl impulse got the better of her.

"Don't make eyes at me like that," she cried, and she actually gave the rose cheek nearest her a sounding little slap, "There!" she exclaimed hysterically and she turned about and ran out of the room crying herself.

Robin had parted from Mademoiselle Valle at Charing Cross Station on the afternoon of the same day, but the night before they had sat up late together and talked a long time. In effect Mademoiselle had said also, "You are going out into the world," but she had not approached the matter in Mrs. Gareth-Lawless' mood. One may have charge of a girl and be her daily companion for years, but there are certain things the very years themselves make it increasingly difficult to say to her. And after all why should one state difficult things in exact phrases unless one lacks breeding and is curious. Anxious she had been at times, but not curious. So it was that even on this night of their parting it was not she who spoke.

It was after a few minutes of sitting in silence and looking at the fire that Robin broke in upon the quiet which had seemed to hold them both.

"I must learn to remember always that I am a sort of servant. I must be very careful. It will be easier for me to realize that I am not in my own house than it would be for other girls. I have not allowed Dowie to dress me for a good many weeks. I have learned how to do everything for myself quite well."

"But Dowie will be in the house with you and the Duchess is very kind."

"Every night I have begun my prayers by thanking God for leaving me Dowie," the girl said. "I have begun them and ended them with the same words." She looked about her and then broke out as if involuntarily. "I shall be away from here. I shall not wear anything or eat anything or sleep on any bed I have not paid for myself."

"These rooms are very pretty. We have been very comfortable here," Mademoiselle said. Suddenly she felt that if she waited a few moments she would know definitely things she had previously only guessed at. "Have you no little regrets?"

"No," answered Robin, "No."

She stood upon the hearth with her hands behind her. Mademoiselle felt as if her fingers were twisting themselves together and the Frenchwoman was peculiarly moved by the fact that she looked like a slim jeune fille of a creature saying a lesson. The lesson opened in this wise.

"I don't know when I first began to know that I was different from all other children," she said in a soft, hot voice--if a voice can express heat. "Perhaps a child who has nothing--nothing--is obliged to begin to THINK before it knows what thoughts are. If they play and are loved and amused they have no time for anything but growing and being happy. You never saw the dreadful little

rooms upstairs----"

"Dowie has told me of them," said Mademoiselle.

"Another child might have forgotten them. I never shall. I--I was so little and they were full of something awful. It was loneliness. The first time Andrews pinched me was one day when the thing frightened me and I suddenly began to cry quite loud. I used to stare out of the window and--I don't know when I noticed it first--I could see the children being taken out by their nurses. And there were always two or three of them and they laughed and talked and skipped. The nurses used to laugh and talk too. Andrews never did. When she took me to the gardens the other nurses sat together and chattered and their children played games with other children. Once a little girl began to talk to me and her nurse called her away. Andrews was very angry and jerked me by my arm and told me that if ever I spoke to a child again she would pinch me."

"Devil!" exclaimed the Frenchwoman.

"I used to think and think, but I could never understand. How could I?"

"A baby!" cried Mademoiselle Valle and she got up and took her in her arms and kissed her. "Chere petite ange!" she murmured. When

she sat down again her cheeks were wet. Robin's were wet also, but she touched them with her handkerchief quickly and dried them. It was as if she had faltered for a moment in her lesson.

"Did Dowie ever tell you anything about Donal?" she asked hesitatingly.

"Something. He was the little boy you played with?"

"Yes. He was the first human creature," she said it very slowly as if trying to find the right words to express what she meant, "--the first HUMAN creature I had ever known. You see Mademoiselle, he--he knew everything. He had always been happy, he BELONGED to people and things. I belonged to nobody and nothing. If I had been like him he would not have seemed so wonderful to me. I was in a kind of delirium of joy. If a creature who had been deaf dumb and blind had suddenly awakened, and seeing on a summer day in a world full of flowers and sun--it might have seemed to them as it seemed to me."

"You have remembered it through all the years," said Mademoiselle, "like that?"

"It was the first time I became alive. One could not forget it. We only played as children play but--it WAS a delirium of joy. I could not bear to go to sleep at night and forget it for a moment.

Yes, I remember it--like that. There is a dream I have every now and then and it is more real than--than this is--" with a wave of her hand about her. "I am always in a real garden playing with a real Donal. And his eyes--his eyes--" she paused and thought, "There is a look in them that is like--it is just like--that first morning."

The change which passed over her face the next moment might have been said to seem to obliterate all trace of the childish memory.

"He was taken away by his mother. That was the beginning of my finding out," she said. "I heard Andrews talking to her sister and in a baby way I gathered that Lord Coombe had sent him. I hated Lord Coombe for years before I found out that he hadn't--and that there was another reason. After that it took time to puzzle things out and piece them together. But at last I found out what the reason had been. Then I began to make plans. These are not my rooms," glancing about her again, "--these are not my clothes," with a little pull at her dress. "I'm not 'a strong character', Mademoiselle, as I wanted to be, but I haven't one little regret--not one." She kneeled down and put her arms round her old friend's waist, lifting her face. "I'm like a leaf blown about by the wind. I don't know what it will do with me. Where do leaves go? One never knows really."

She put her face down on Mademoiselle's knee then and cried with

soft bitterness.

When she bade her good-bye at Charing Cross Station and stood and watched the train until it was quite out of sight, afterwards she went back to the rooms for which she felt no regrets. And before she went to bed that night Feather came and gave her farewell maternal advice and warning.