

CHAPTER XXIX

In the serious little room the Duchess had given to her Robin built for herself a condition she called happiness. She drew the spiritual substance from which it was made from her pleasure in the books of reference closely fitted into their shelves, in the files for letters and more imposing documents, in the varieties of letter paper and envelopes of different sizes and materials which had been provided for her use in case of necessity.

"You may not use the more substantial ones often, but you must be prepared for any unexpected contingency," the Duchess had explained, thereby smoothing her pathway by the suggestion of responsibilities.

The girl did not know the extent of her employer's consideration for her, but she knew that she was kind with a special grace and comprehension. A subtle truth she also did not recognize was that the remote flame of her own being was fiercely alert in its readiness to leap upward at any suspicion that her duties were not worth the payment made for them and that for any reason which might include Lord Coombe she was occupying a position which was a sinecure. She kept her serious little room in order herself, dusting and almost polishing the reference books, arranging and re-arranging the files with such exactness of system that she could--as is the vaunt of the model of orderly perfection--lay her hand upon any document "in the dark." She was punctuality's self

and held herself in readiness at any moment to appear at the Duchess' side as if a magician had instantaneously transported her there before the softly melodious private bell connected with her room had ceased to vibrate. The correctness of her to deference to the convenience of Mrs. James the housekeeper in her simplest communication with Dowie quite touched that respectable person's heart.

"She's a young lady," Mrs. James remarked to Dowie. "And a credit to you and her governess, Mrs. Dowson. Young ladies have gone almost out of fashion."

"Mademoiselle Valle had spent her governessing days among the highest. My own places were always with gentle-people. Nothing ever came near her that could spoil her manners. A good heart she was born with," was the civil reply of Dowie.

"Nothing ever came NEAR her--?" Mrs. James politely checked what she became conscious was a sort of unconscious exclamation.

"Nothing," said Dowie going on with her sheet hemming steadily.

Robin wrote letters and copied various documents for the Duchess, she went shopping with her and executed commissions to order. She was allowed to enter into correspondence with the village schoolmistress and the wife of the Vicar at Darte Norham and to buy

prizes for notable decorum and scholarship in the school, and baby linen and blankets for the Maternity Bag and other benevolences. She liked buying prizes and the baby clothes very much because--though she was unaware of the fact--her youth delighted in youngness and the fulfilling of young desires. Even oftener and more significantly than ever did eyes turn towards her--try to hold hers--look after her eagerly when she walked in the streets or drove with the Duchess in the high-swung barouche. More and more she became used to it and gradually she ceased to be afraid of it and began to feel it nearly always--there were sometimes exceptions--a friendly thing.

She saw friendliness in it because when she caught sight as she so often did of young things like herself passing in pairs, laughing and talking and turning to look into each other's eyes, her being told her that it was sweet and human and inevitable. They always turned and looked at each other--these pairs--and then they smiled or laughed or flushed a little. As she had not known when first she recognized, as she looked down into the street from her nursery window, that the children nearly always passed in twos or threes and laughed and skipped and talked, so she did not know when she first began to notice these joyous young pairs and a certain touch of exultation in them and feel that it was sweet and quite a simple common natural thing. Her noting and being sometimes moved by it was as natural as her pleasure in the opening of spring flowers or the new thrill of spring birds--but she did not know that either.

The brain which has worked through many years in unison with the soul to which it was apportioned has evolved a knowledge which has deep cognizance of the universal law. The brain of the old Duchess had so worked, keeping pace always with its guide, never visualizing the possibility of working alone, also never falling into the abyss of that human folly whose conviction is that all that one sees and gives a special name to is all that exists--or that the names accepted by the world justly and clearly describe qualities, yearnings, moods, as they are. This had developed within her wide perception and a wisdom which was sane and kind to tenderness.

As she drove through the streets with Robin beside her she saw the following eyes, she saw the girl's soft friendly look at the young creatures who passed her glowing and uplifted by the joy of life, and she was moved and even disturbed.

After her return from one particular morning's outing she sent for Dowie.

"You have taken care of Miss Robin since she was a little child?" she began.

"She was not quite six when I first went to her, your grace."

"You are not of the women who only feed and bathe a child and keep her well dressed. You have been a sort of mother to her."

"I've tried to, your grace. I've loved her and watched over her and she's loved me, I do believe."

"That is why I want to talk to you about her, Dowie. If you were the woman who merely comes and goes in a child's life, I could not. She is--a very beautiful young thing, Dowie."

"From her little head to her slim bits of feet, your grace. No one knows better than I do."

The Duchess' renowned smile revealed itself.

"A beautiful young thing ought to see and know other beautiful young things and make friends with them. That is one of the reasons for their being put in the world. Since she has been with me she has spoken to no one under forty. Has she never had young friends?"

"Never, your grace. Once two--young baggages--were left to have tea with her and they talked to her about divorce scandals and correspondents. She never wanted to see them again." Dowie's face set itself in lines of perfectly correct inexpressiveness and she added, "They set her asking me questions I couldn't answer. And she broke down because she suddenly understood why. No, your grace,

she's not known those of her own age."

"She is--of the ignorance of a child," the Duchess thought it out slowly.

"She thinks not, poor lamb, but she is," Dowie answered. The Duchess' eyes met hers and they looked at each other for a moment. Dowie tried to retain a non-committal steadiness and the Duchess observing the intention knew that she was free to speak.

"Lord Coombe confided to me that she had passed through a hideous danger which had made a lasting impression on her," she said in a low voice. "He told me because he felt it would explain certain reserves and fears in her."

"Sometimes she wakes up out of nightmares about it," said Dowie. "And she creeps into my room shivering and I take her into my bed and hold her in my arms until she's over the panic. She says the worst of it is that she keeps thinking that there may have been other girls trapped like her--and that they did not get away."

The Duchess was very thoughtful. She saw the complications in which such a horror would involve a girl's mind.

"If she consorted with other young things and talked nonsense with them and shared their pleasures she would forget it," she said.

"Ah!" exclaimed Dowie. "That's it."

The question in the Duchess' eyes when she lifted them required an answer and she gave it respectfully.

"The thing that happened was only the last touch put to what she'd gradually been finding out as she grew from child to young girl.

The ones she would like to know--she said it in plain words once to Mademoiselle--might not want to know her. I must take the liberty of speaking plain, your grace, or it's no use me speaking at all.

She holds it deep in her mind that she's a sort of young outcast."

"I must convince her that she is not--." It was the beginning of what the Duchess had meant to say, but she actually found herself pausing, held for the moment by Dowie's quiet, civil eye.

"Was your grace in your kindness thinking--?" was what the excellent woman said.

"Yes. That I would invite young people to meet her--help them to know each other and to make friends." And even as she said it she was conscious of being slightly under the influence of Dowie's wise gaze.

"Your grace only knows those young people she would like to know."

It was a mere simple statement.

"People are not as censorious as they once were." Her grace's tone was intended to reply to the suggestion lying in the words which had worn the air of statement without comment.

"Some are not, but some are," Dowie answered. "There's two worlds in London now, your grace. One is your grace's and one is Mrs. Gareth-Lawless'. I HAVE heard say there are others between, but I only know those two."

The Duchess pondered again.

"You are thinking that what Miss Robin said to Mademoiselle Valle might be true--in mine. And perhaps you are not altogether wrong even if you are not altogether right."

"Until I went to take care of Miss Robin I had only had places in families Mrs. Gareth-Lawless' set didn't touch anywhere. What I'm remembering is that there was a--strictness--shown sometimes even when it seemed a bit harsh. Among the servants the older ones said that is was BECAUSE of the new sets and their fast wicked ways. One of my young ladies once met another young lady about her own age--she was just fifteen--at a charity bazaar and they made friends and liked each other very much. The young lady's mother was one there was a lot of talk about in connection with a

person of very high station--the highest, your grace--and everyone knew. The girl was a lovely little creature and beautifully behaved. It was said her mother wanted to push her into the world she couldn't get into herself. The acquaintance was stopped, your grace--it was put a stop to at once. And my poor little young lady quite broke her heart over it, and I heard it was much worse for the other."

"I will think this over," the Duchess said. "It needs thinking over. I wished to talk to you because I have seen that she has fixed little ideas regarding what she thinks is suited to her position as a paid companion and she might not be prepared. I wish you to see that she has a pretty little frock or so which she could wear if she required them."

"She has two, your grace," Dowie smiled affectionately as she said it. "One for evening and one for special afternoon wear in case your grace needed her to attend you for some reason. They are as plain as she dare make them, but when she puts one on she can't help giving it A LOOK."

"Yes--she would give it all it needed," her grace said. "Thank you, Dowie. You may go."

With her sketch of a respectful curtsy Dowie went towards the door. As she approached it her step became slower; before she

reached it she had stopped and there was a remarkable look on her face--a suddenly heroic look. She turned and made several steps backward and paused again which unexpected action caused the Duchess to turn to glance at her. When she glanced her grace recognized the heroic look and waited, with a consciousness of some slight new emotion within herself, for its explanation.

"Your grace," Dowie began, asking God himself to give courage if she was doing right and to check her if she was making a mistake, "When your grace was thinking of the parents of other young ladies and gentlemen--did it come to you to put it to yourself whether you'd be willing--" she caught her breath, but ended quite clearly, respectfully, reasonably. "Lady Kathryn--Lord Halwyn--" Lady Kathryn was the Duchess' young granddaughter, Lord Halwyn was her extremely good-looking grandson who was in the army.

The Duchess understood what the heroic look had meant, and her respect for it was great. Its intention had not been to suggest inclusion of George and Kathryn in her pun, it had only with pure justice put it to her to ask herself what her own personal decision in such a matter would be.

"You do feel as if you were her mother," she said. "And you are a practical, clear-minded woman. It is only if I myself am willing to take such a step that I have a right to ask it of other people. Lady Lothwell is the mother I must speak to first. Her children

are mine though I am a mere grandmother."

Lady Lothwell was her daughter and though she was not regarded as Victorian either of the Early or the Middle periods, Dowie as she returned to her own comfortable quarters wondered what would happen.