

Occasional Wife

By EDNA ROSS WEBSTER

Author of
"JORETTA"
"LIPSTICK GIRL" ETC.

CHAPTER 51

AVIS MANAGED to visit the exhibit alone with John Upforth on the day before the final vote would be cast for the winner of the Paris scholarship. She had made the coincidence seem casual enough. And her interest in art had solicited her uncle's unqualified approval from the beginning. His own sons and only daughter had evinced none of his artistic appreciation, which was one of the few disappointments of his life. So, when his niece not only patronized the profession but actually won her degree at National, he was immensely proud, and sympathetic with her plans and interests.

So generous was his measure of approval that he had purchased one of her best paintings and hung it in his library, though he had to admit to himself that she couldn't have sold it elsewhere for a song. But he advocated that praise stimulates effort and encourages ambition.

He was particularly noted for his philanthropy to talent, and not a small part of the Paris scholarship fund was responsible to his generosity; but he never permitted his left hand to suspect what kept his right hand so busy.

"The judges have no easy task, I can tell you that," he confided to Avis at the exhibit. "It was difficult even to eliminate the entries."

"Do only beauty and perfection of detail enter into the consideration?" she asked, seriously.

"Oh, no, there are many points to be considered."

"Such as—"

"Subject matter, position, execution of material—"

"Does the thought behind the object—the reason for the creation, its originality—mean anything?"

"Indeed, it means a very great deal. Is there a piece here in which you vision a purpose, a story?"

"Oh, yes, a splendid one. Uncle John, stand just here and look at that group over there, third from the end. Doesn't it tell you a dramatic story?"

"Yes, I remember it well in the original selection. There was no question about entering it, I recall. Undoubtedly, it is one of the best. But there are so many among the best."

"But what other one tells so poignant a story of life?" she insisted.

"There is the seagull—beautiful, but—just a seagull, a splendid likeness of Andrew Haycock after all, just the portrait of a man; those nude figures, titled 'Love'—about which there is nothing individual; the boy on a hill in a storm, the modernistic conception of 'The Kiss'—but who would want a kiss like that?" she smiled.

"I suspect," he looked at her shrewdly, "that you are campaigning for a vote for that young man of yours."

"Only because he deserves it," Avis defended.

"I don't doubt that," he agreed, readily. "Well, my dear, if it will relieve your anxiety and you will keep the secret to yourself, he already had my vote from the beginning. I might say that my opinion could have wavered between that and the Haycock portrait, but since there had to be some dividing factor, your interest in Peter Anson might as well be it. I see nothing unethical about that. It is merely a matter of matching points, and, as you say, the vision and the story behind that group of immigrants should be favored. But don't hope too much. My vote is only one of seven, you know."

"She hugged him affectionately. "One of seven is better than none. I am glad to know that Peter will have one vote, anyway. That will draw attention to his work, at least. And you might be able to influence a good sale for him," she suggested, covertly.

"Perhaps I can," he agreed, with an amused smile.

Meanwhile, the results on Camilla's work were progressing rapidly. Wheatheart's sales had doubled within a fortnight, production was increased and the company was one of



"I shan't be able to afford a wife like you."

few in the city calling back its former employees. Negotiations were being made with a national radio network to broadcast a Tiny Tot series for a children's half-hour program. Consultations, plans, discussions, were in order.

"Camilla was the central figure. Her brain whirled with the exhilaration of so much attention and approbation, even while it functioned calmly and clearly with the execution of her plans."

Finally, it was decided that she should prepare the stories, being the only person familiar with the characteristics and activities of her diminutive people. Her salary would be doubled and an additional sum paid for each story. These would be comparatively easy for her to produce, because they would follow the same action as appeared in the advertisements. The work would involve only a little more time, which she could now spare from her drawing board, and her remuneration would be doubled thereby.

Finally, the most astonishing development of all was presented to her. The radio manager insisted that the obvious person to present the Tiny Tots, by air, to her juvenile audience, was the author herself, Camilla Anson.

Camilla protested, overwhelmed by the possibility. "But I can't do everything," she objected, bewildered. "How can I do all copy, write manuscripts and broadcast two days each week?"

"It is a pretty large order, but you can do it," the advertising manager encouraged. "You will have a secretary to attend to everything except your most personal work, and the broadcasting after the first few experiences will become very natural to you. We can arrange for the national hook-up from here instead of from the New York studios."

So it was arranged, and Camilla returned to her apartment that evening so thrilled and bewildered and dejected that she couldn't decide whether to laugh or cry. She summoned Peter and, secure in his arms, tried each outlet of her emotions.

He held her close, scarcely believing what his ears heard; that his Camilla had become a national figure in her field, almost overnight. He had recognized her talent from the beginning, but to have the world recognize her so quickly was a revelation and an enigma at the same time.

"Why, precious?" he exclaimed, holding her off to gaze into her

flushed face, "I shan't be able to afford a wife like you any longer."

"Peter, don't say that!" she laughed happily. "None of it would be any good at all, without you. And if you don't want me to do it—I won't."

"You mean that?" incredulous. She met his eyes bravely. "I do, Peter."

He drew her again into his embrace. "My darling, how could I deny you the right to take such an opportunity when I can't take care of you? Some day—perhaps—"

his arms relaxed about her and his words became impatient. "Oh, I don't know, I've always talked about what I am going to do, while you have kept quiet—and done it!"

That old expression of haunting doubt and chagrin clouded his face and the monster of jealousy gripped insidiously at his heart. He tried valiantly to shake it off, but its hold was tenacious. He sank into a chair, listlessly.

Camilla was on her knees beside him, instantly, as if she had leaped a widening chasm in desperation. Her arms clung to him. "Peter, dear Peter, tell me you don't want me to go on with this! Tell me the truth!" she pleaded. "I want to do just what you wish for me, what your love will let me do. I don't want to leave anyone or have anything except you and your love."

He was instantly contrite, tender. "Why, if I could plan your life for you, I couldn't wish it to be more perfect. You don't think I'd be a dog in the manger, do you?" he demanded, with a tremulous attempt at mirth. "I guess I'm just so proud of you and glad for you that I don't know how to act—don't know what I'm doing."

"Are you sure?" anxiously. "Why, of course. Tell me what every day you broadcast, I'll come in and get more inspiration from hearing your voice while I listen to the whole nation than I could get a dozen other ways. I'll say myself, 'That's your wife, she's a worthy girl, she'll do that and be herself and in no time, get power, to work and deserve her!'"

With such ray-jesting and reassuring assurances, he convinced her of the approval, with this proviso, "Of course, if that day ever comes, when I can watch your success. The time, you will be expected to meet before me of our original agreement."

"That day can't be too soon for me," she declared, bravely.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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