

A Tyrant Abdicates

by Rex Stout, 1886-1975

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THE FACT THAT MRS. COIT kept her rooms full could be accounted for only by the Law of Chance. As a matter of free choice, no rational human being would ever have submitted to her sour tutelage. But situated as it was, on East Thirty-seventh Street, her house had inevitably attracted a certain portion of those poor unfortunates who find in that locality everything of home that New York can mean to them; and what Mrs. Coit got she usually kept. Her manner was so very forbidding that it seemed even to forbid their escape.

Perhaps the most unpopular of Mrs. Coit's activities was the strict supervision of the movements of her men roomers. It came to be generally understood that coming in at eleven o'clock was barely safe, midnight required a thorough explanation, and one o'clock was unpardonable. From this you may judge of the rest.

The two who suffered most from this stern maternalism were the Boy and the Girl. It is unnecessary to give their names, since, being in love, they were

undistinguishable from several million other boys and girls that the world has seen or read about. To confirm their title as members of this club, their course of true love did not run smooth. No doubt it is trying enough to be bothered by a particular mother, a strict father, or an inquisitive aunt; but all of these are as nothing to a prying landlady.

Mrs. Coit was fat, forty, and unfair. No one knew the nature of her widowhood, whether simple or complex, voluntary or forced, but all were agreed that Mr. Coit was lucky to escape, through whatever medium. The Bookkeeper had once declared positively that Mrs. Coit was a grass widow, but, being pressed for an explanation, admitted that he had grounded his belief on no better foundation than the too evident presence of dry hay in the mattresses.

The roomers—that is, the seasoned ones—were little disturbed by her. Most of them had come to accept life as a dull and colorless routine, to which the impression of anything unusual came as a relief; and Mrs. Coit served as matter for continual amusement. They laughed at her and submitted to her minute censorship without complaint.

But in each of these dulled and sluggish hearts old Romance crouched, ever watchful for an opportunity to make its presence known. That opportunity arrived on the day that the Boy first met the Girl.

Within a week every roomer in the house was enlisted on the side of Cupid. It is true that Cupid needed no assistance, especially from these dried-up mortals whom he had long ago abandoned; but they thought they helped, and Cupid always was an ungrateful little wretch. The Boy was fair, the Girl was sweet, and it truly seemed that it would take much more than the grim visage of Mrs. Coit to frighten away that ever-welcome though sometimes painful visitor.

Mrs. Coit, however, was doing her best. After ten years of unchallenged tyranny, her subjects openly rebelled and resented her malicious activity. As I have said, for themselves they did not care—what mattered a little extra discomfort in lives long since devoted to the Prosaic? But when it came to the Boy and the Girl, and interference with the divine right of rings, they rallied round the flag and struck hard for the colors of Love.

As time passed and the general interest in the affair deepened, Mrs. Coit redoubled her vigilance and asperity. Her remarks to the Boy on the foolishness of marrying at his age and on his salary were repeated with emphasis, and to the Girl she talked so severely about the selfishness of hampering the Boy's career that she left her in tears. This was unwise; it merely served as an excuse to the Boy for so many more kisses.

Many were the objections entered by Mrs. Coit, many were the petty trials and inconveniences she managed to inflict on the lovers; all, of course, in vain. The women declared that she was jealous of the Boy, which was manifestly absurd; the men, that she was naturally mean, which was somewhat ungallant. Anyway, they might have spared their abuses, since the Boy and the Girl had finally been steered through the shoals of criticism and the rocks of opposition to the sheltered harbor of a Definite Engagement. Mrs. Coit had settled down to a dull resentment; the roomers, to a calm and pleasurable expectation.

Mrs. Coit, on her daily round of dusting, was commenting to herself somewhat bitterly on the folly of youth and the general levity of mankind. In the

Bookkeeper's room she grew particularly resentful, since he had only the day before advised her to mind her own business, and jabbing the duster savagely at a corner of the mantel, she knocked to the floor a little plaster bust of Milton, which broke into a dozen pieces. Sobered by this unhousewifely incident, she proceeded to the Boy's room, next door. She entered without knocking, and to her surprise found the Boy sitting on the edge of the bed with his face buried in his hands. Mrs. Coit regarded him silently, with increasing wrath. The Boy, not hearing her enter, remained motionless.

„Well!“ said Mrs. Coit finally, „Ain't you goin' to work?“

The Boy looked up. „No.“

His eyes were swollen with sleeplessness and his face was pale, his hair uncombed, his whole figure dejected and forlorn.

Mrs. Coit noted each of these symptoms separately and carefully.

„Lose your job?“ she asked, almost hopefully.

The Boy shook his head, and buried it again in his hands. Mrs. Coit, trying to maintain her attitude of severe disapproval, began to dust the Morris chair. Then, after discovering that she had gone over the same arm four times, she turned to the Boy again, „Sick?“ she demanded.

„No,“ said the Boy, without moving. Evidently he was not looking for sympathy.

Mrs. Coit regarded him critically. No, he certainly wasn't drunk. Not him. Then, glancing over the bed, her eye fell on a photograph in a little gilt frame. It showed the face of the Boy, smiling, happy.

Mrs. Coit understood at once. For five long months this same photograph had been staring at her from the dressing table in the Girl's room, on the floor below. To confirm her suspicion, she looked at the mantel, where a picture of the Girl had occupied the place of honor. It was not there.

Mrs. Coit gazed at the picture for a full minute, then without a word completed her dusting and prepared to leave the room. The Boy remained silent. Mrs. Coit, her hand on the doorknob, turned and looked at him hesitatingly. Then, „Have you had a fight with her?“ she demanded.

The Boy looked up at her despairingly. „What do you care?“ he cried. His voice was harsh and shrill with pain.

Mrs. Coit started to answer, then, thinking better of it, turned and fled down the hall, banging the door after her. The Boy snatched up the picture, pulled off its frame, tore it in a dozen pieces, and threw them on the floor.

Fifteen minutes later Mrs. Coit, passing through the lower hall, heard the outer door open, and, looking down the stairway, saw the Boy go out and close the door after him. Then, muttering to herself something about „idiot,“ and holding the duster firmly before her after the manner of a fixed bayonet, she proceeded to the Girl's room and entered with an air of determination.

Here the havoc was even greater. The Girl, reclining limply and disconsolately in an easy chair, eyes inflamed, cheeks marked with tear-tracks and splotches of red, turned and looked at the intruder indifferently.

„I knew it,“ said Mrs. Coit, in a tone of deep satisfaction. „Why ain't you at work?“

The Girl tried to smile. „I have a headache,“ she said.

Mrs. Coit snorted contemptuously. „Oh, I know all about it,“ she declared. „He just told me. I knew it'd be like this.“

The Girl covered her face with her hands and turned away.

„I knew it'd be like this,“ repeated Mrs. Coit.

The Girl made no sign.

„What'd you want to fight about a little thing like that for?“ Mrs. Coit asked cunningly.

„It didn't seem little then,“ said the Girl wearily.

Mrs. Coit pressed her advantage, but to no purpose. The Girl refused to give any information; she even refused to become angry. Finally, at the insistence of Mrs. Coit, she dressed herself and prepared to go to the office.

„You'd better walk around a while before you go in,“ said Mrs. Coit. „Your face looks like a boiled cucumber.“

After she had gone Mrs. Coit sat in the chair she had left, gazing thoughtfully at some little bits of paper scattered on the floor. What she was thinking, no one could possibly have told. Her face expressed nothing but grimness, her attitude satisfaction; and as she stooped over to gather up the bits of paper her lips settled into what might have been a line of triumphant resolve.

That evening, for the first time in many months, the Boy returned from the office alone. He and the Girl had walked together always—but that was over. However much he loved her, he still felt that she had said to him that which could never be forgiven, especially since it was undeserved. Of course, if she came to him and asked forgiveness—he caught his breath at the thought—but that, he was sure, she would never do.

His day at the office had been miserable, and the future, he reflected, held nothing for him but a dreary succession of similar ones. He had decided to leave Mrs. Coit's that very evening, since everything there would be full of bittersweet memories of the one happy period of his life. One has great capacity for grief, as for joy, at twenty-one.

As he was turning the key in the lock of the outer door, a figure came up the steps. It was the Girl.

Without speaking, the Boy opened the door and stood aside politely to allow her to pass. She bowed her head in thanks, and silently began to ascend the stairs to her room.

The Boy's voice came after her, calling her name. She turned and looked down at him. He was standing by the mail rack, holding a large envelope in his hand.

„Is it for me?“ asked the Girl doubtfully.

„No,“ said the Boy. „It's for—us.“

Her face flushed at the familiar pronoun.

he Boy ascended the stairs to where she stood.

„I suppose we must open it together,“ he continued coldly. „It's addressed to both of us.“

The Girl looked on silently while he tore open the envelope. His elbow brushed her arm, and they both started nervously.

Then, as they gazed together at the card the envelope had contained, they blushed almost painfully. The Boy felt his heart mount to his throat; the Girl

put up her hand to brush away the mist that suddenly formed before her eyes. Pasted side by side on the card were the two photographs they had that morning torn up and thrown away, and written below in a shaky, curious hand was the inscription:

To two young fools
from an old fool.

And tied to the card with a piece of faded blue ribbon was an old, well-worn wedding ring!

Fifteen minutes later the Boy and the Girl came down, hand in hand, to the sitting room where Mrs. Coit sat poring over her account books. She rose at their approach.

„Well?“ she demanded aggressively.

The Boy, nothing daunted, advanced boldly, holding one hand toward her.

„Here is your ring, Mrs. Coit,“ he said, the old happy smile in his eyes. „I thought you might want it back again.“

Mrs. Coit hesitated, and for the first time in the knowledge of Thirty-seventh Street seemed embarrassed.

„That ain't my ring,“ said she finally.

Then occurred the outrage. Perhaps she wouldn't have minded so much, but just at that moment the Bookkeeper passed through the hall, and, glancing in at the door, saw everything. The Boy threw his arms around Mrs. Coit's neck, gave her a resounding kiss on either cheek, and, leaving the ring lying on the desk, fled toward the stairs, the Girl following.

Mrs. Coit recovered in time to pursue them to the foot of the stairs.

„Hey, there!“ she called, a curious break in the voice she tried to make stern. „Hey, there! You left your room in a pretty fix this morning, you did! Once more like that, and out you go!“

From the floor above came the sound of happy, mocking laughter. Mrs. Coit's reign had ended.

