

CHAPTER XVIII

In the added suite of rooms at the back of the house, Robin grew through the years in which It was growing also. On the occasion when her mother saw her, she realized that she was not at least going to look like a barmaid. At no period of her least refulgent moment did she verge upon this type. Dowie took care of her and Mademoiselle Valle educated her with the assistance of certain masters who came to give lessons in German and Italian.

"Why only German and Italian and French," said Feather, "why not Latin and Greek, as well, if she is to be so accomplished?"

"It is modern languages one needs at this period. They ought to be taught in the Board Schools," Coombe replied. "They are not accomplishments but workman's tools. Nationalities are not separated as they once were. To be familiar with the language of one's friends--and one's enemies--is a protective measure."

"What country need one protect oneself against? When all the kings and queens are either married to each other's daughters or cousins or take tea with each other every year or so. Just think of the friendliness of Germany for instance----"

"I do," said Coombe, "very often. That is one of the reasons I

choose German rather than Latin and Greek. Julius Caesar and Nero are no longer reasons for alarm."

"Is the Kaiser with his seventeen children and his respectable Frau?" giggled Feather. "All that he cares about is that women shall be made to remember that they are born for nothing but to cook and go to church and have babies. One doesn't wonder at the clothes they wear."

It was not a month after this, however, when Lord Coombe, again warming himself at his old friend's fire, gave her a piece of information.

"The German teacher, Herr Wiese, has hastily returned to his own country," he said.

She lifted her eyebrows inquiringly.

"He found himself suspected of being a spy," was his answer. "With most excellent reason. Some first-rate sketches of fortifications were found in a box he left behind him in his haste. The country--all countries--are sown with those like him. Mild spectacled students and clerks in warehouses and manufactories are weighing and measuring resources; round-faced, middle-aged governesses are making notes of conversation and of any other thing which may be useful. In time of war--if they were caught at what are now their

simple daily occupations--they would be placed against a wall and shot. As it is, they are allowed to play about among us and slip away when some fellow worker's hint suggests it is time."

"German young men are much given to spending a year or so here in business positions," the Duchess wore a thoughtful air. "That has been going on for a decade or so. One recognizes their Teuton type in shops and in the streets. They say they come to learn the language and commercial methods."

"Not long ago a pompous person, who is the owner of a big shop, pointed out to me three of them among his salesmen," Coombe said. "He plumed himself on his astuteness in employing them. Said they worked for low wages and cared for very little else but finding out how things were done in England. It wasn't only business knowledge they were after, he said; they went about everywhere--into factories and dock yards, and public buildings, and made funny little notes and sketches of things they didn't understand--so that they could explain them in Germany. In his fatuous, insular way, it pleased him to regard them rather as a species of aborigines benefiting by English civilization. The English Ass and the German Ass are touchingly alike. The shade of difference is that the English Ass's sublime self-satisfaction is in the German Ass self-glorification. The English Ass smirks and plumes himself; the German Ass blusters and bullies and defies."

"Do you think of engaging another German Master for the little girl?" the Duchess asked the question casually.

"I have heard of a quiet young woman who has shown herself thorough and well-behaved in a certain family for three years. Perhaps she also will disappear some day, but, for the present, she will serve the purpose."

As he had not put into words to others any explanation of the story of the small, smart establishment in the Mayfair street, so he had put into words no explanation to her. That she was aware of its existence he knew, but what she thought of it, or imagined he himself thought of it, he had not at any period inquired.

Whatsoever her point of view might be, he knew it would be unbiassed, clear minded and wholly just. She had asked no question and made no comment. The rapid, whirligig existence of the well-known fashionable groups, including in their circles varieties of the Mrs. Gareth-Lawless type, were to be seen at smart functions and to be read of in newspapers and fashion reports, if one's taste lay in the direction of a desire to follow their movements. The time had passed when pretty women of her kind were cut off by severities of opinion from the delights of a world they had thrown their dice daringly to gain. The worldly old axiom, "Be virtuous and you will be happy," had been ironically paraphrased too often. "Please yourself and you will be much happier than if you were virtuous," was a practical reading.

But for a certain secret which she alone knew and which no one would in the least have believed, if she had proclaimed it from the housetops, Feather would really have been entirely happy. And, after all, the fly in her ointment was merely an odd sting a fantastic Fate had inflicted on her vanity and did not in any degree affect her pleasures. So many people lived in glass houses that the habit of throwing stones had fallen out of fashion as an exercise. There were those, too, whose houses of glass, adroitly given the air of being respectable conservatories, engendered in the dwellers therein a leniency towards other vitreous constructions. As a result of this last circumstance, there were times when quite stately equipages drew up before Mrs. Gareth-Lawless' door and visiting cards bearing the names of acquaintances much to be desired were left upon the salver presented by Jennings. Again, as a result of this circumstance, Feather employed some laudable effort in her desire to give her own glass house the conservatory aspect. Her little parties became less noisy, if they still remained lively. She gave an "afternoon" now and then to which literary people and artists, and persons who "did things" were invited. She was pretty enough to allure an occasional musician to "do something", some new poet to read or recite. Fashionable people were asked to come and hear and talk to them, and, in this way, she threw out delicate fishing lines here and there, and again and again drew up a desirable fish of substantial size. Sometimes the vague rumour connected with the name of the Head of the House

of Coombe was quite forgotten and she was referred to amiably as "That beautiful creature, Mrs. Gareth-Lawless." She was left a widow when she was nothing but a girl. If she hadn't had a little money of her own, and if her husband's relatives hadn't taken care of her, she would have had a hard time of it. She is amazingly clever at managing her, small income, they added. Her tiny house is one of the jolliest little places in London--always full of good looking people and amusing things.

But, before Robin was fourteen, she had found out that the house she lived in was built of glass and that any chance stone would break its panes, even if cast without particular skill in aiming. She found it out in various ways, but the seed from which all things sprang to the fruition of actual knowledge was the child tragedy through which she had learned that Donal had been taken from her--because his mother would not let him love and play with a little girl whose mother let Lord Coombe come to her house--because Lord Coombe was so bad that even servants whispered secrets about him. Her first interpretation of this had been that of a mere baby, but it had filled her being with detestation of him, and curious doubts of her mother. Donal's mother, who was good and beautiful, would not let him come to see her and kept Donal away from him. If the Lady Downstairs was good, too, then why did laugh and talk to him and seem to like him? She had thought this over for hours--sometimes wakening in the night to lie and puzzle over it feverishly. Then, as time went by, she had begun to remember

that she had never played with any of the children in the Square Gardens. It had seemed as though this had been because Andrews would not let her. But, if she was not fit to play with Donal, perhaps the nurses and governesses and mothers of the other children knew about it and would not trust their little girls and boys to her damaging society. She did not know what she could have done to harm them--and Oh! how COULD she have harmed Donal!--but there must be something dreadful about a child whose mother knew bad people--something which other children could "catch" like scarlet fever. From this seed other thoughts had grown. She did not remain a baby long. A fervid little brain worked for her, picked up hints and developed suggestions, set her to singularly alert reasoning which quickly became too mature for her age. The quite horrid little girl, who flouncingly announced that she could not be played with any more "because of Lord Coombe" set a spark to a train. After that time she used to ask occasional carefully considered questions of Dowson and Mademoiselle Valle, which puzzled them by their vagueness. The two women were mutually troubled by a moody habit she developed of sitting absorbed in her own thoughts, and with a concentrated little frown drawing her brows together. They did not know that she was silently planning a subtle cross examination of them both, whose form would be such that neither of them could suspect it of being anything but innocent. She felt that she was growing cunning and deceitful, but she did not care very much. She possessed a clever and determined, though very young brain. She loved both Dowson and Mademoiselle, but she must find out

about things for herself, and she was not going to harm or trouble them. They would never know she had found out: Whatsoever she discovered, she would keep to herself.

But one does not remain a baby long, and one is a little girl only a few years, and, even during the few years, one is growing and hearing and seeing all the time. After that, one is beginning to be a rather big girl and one has seen books and newspapers, and overheard scraps of things from servants. If one is brought up in a convent and allowed to read nothing but literature selected by nuns, a degree of aloofness from knowledge may be counted upon--though even convent schools, it is said, encounter their difficulties in perfect discipline.

Robin, in her small "Palace" was well taken care of but her library was not selected by nuns. It was chosen with thought, but it was the library of modern youth. Mademoiselle Valle's theories of a girl's education were not founded on a belief that, until marriage, she should be led about by a string blindfolded, and with ears stopped with wax.

"That results in a bleating lamb's being turned out of its fold to make its way through a jungle full of wild creatures and pitfalls it has never heard of," she said in discussing the point with Dowson. She had learned that Lord Coombe agreed with her. He, as well as she, chose the books and his taste was admirable. Its inclusion

of an unobtrusive care for girlhood did not preclude the exercise of the intellect. An early developed passion for reading led the child far and wide. Fiction, history, poetry, biography, opened up vistas to a naturally quick and eager mind. Mademoiselle found her a clever pupil and an affection-inspiring little being even from the first.

She always felt, however, that in the depths of her something held itself hidden--something she did not speak of. It was some thought which perhaps bewildered her, but which something prevented her making clear to herself by the asking of questions. Mademoiselle Valle finally became convinced that she never would ask the questions.

Arrived a day when Feather swept into the Palace with some visitors. They were two fair and handsome little girls of thirteen and fourteen, whose mother, having taken them shopping, found it would suit her extremely well to drop them somewhere for an hour while she went to her dressmaker. Feather was quite willing that they should be left with Robin and Mademoiselle until their own governess called for them.

"Here are Eileen and Winifred Erwyn, Robin," she said, bringing them in. "Talk to them and show them your books and things until the governess comes. Dowson, give them some cakes and tea."

Mrs. Erwyn was one of the most treasured of Feather's circle. Her little girls' governess was a young Frenchwoman, entirely unlike Mademoiselle Valle. Eileen and Winifred saw Life from their schoolroom windows as an open book. Why not, since their governess and their mother's French maid conversed freely, and had rather penetrating voices even when they were under the impression that they lowered them out of deference to blameless youth. Eileen and Winifred liked to remain awake to listen as long as they could after they went to bed. They themselves had large curious eyes and were given to whispering and giggling.

They talked a good deal to Robin and assumed fashionable little grown up airs. They felt themselves mature creatures as compared to her, since she was not yet thirteen. They were so familiar with personages and functions that Robin felt that they must have committed to memory every morning the column in the Daily Telegraph known as "London Day by Day." She sometimes read it herself, because it was amusing to her to read about parties and weddings and engagements. But it did not seem easy to remember. Winifred and Eileen were delighted to display themselves in the character of instructresses. They entertained Robin for a short time, but, after that, she began to dislike the shared giggles which so often broke out after their introduction of a name or an incident. It seemed to hint that they were full of amusing information which they held back. Then they were curious and made remarks and asked questions. She began to think them rather horrid.

"We saw Lord Coombe yesterday," said Winifred at last, and the unnecessary giggle followed.

"We think he wears the most beautiful clothes we ever saw! You remember his overcoat, Winnie?" said Eileen. "He MATCHES so--and yet you don't know exactly how he matches," and she giggled also.

"He is the best dressed man in London," Winifred stated quite grandly. "I think he is handsome. So do Mademoiselle and Florine."

Robin said nothing at all. What Dowson privately called "her secret look" made her face very still. Winifred saw the look and, not understanding it or her, became curious.

"Don't you?" she said.

"No," Robin answered. "He has a wicked face. And he's old, too."

"You think he's old because you're only about twelve," inserted Eileen. "Children think everybody who is grown-up must be old. I used to. But now people don't talk and think about age as they used to. Mademoiselle says that when a man has distinction he is always young--and nicer than boys."

Winifred, who was persistent, broke in.

"As to his looking wicked, I daresay he IS wicked in a sort of interesting way. Of course, people say all sorts of things about him. When he was quite young, he was in love with a beautiful little royal Princess--or she was in love with him--and her husband either killed her or she died of a broken heart--I don't know which."

Mademoiselle Valle had left them for a short time feeling that they were safe with their tea and cakes and would feel more at ease relieved of her presence. She was not long absent, but Eileen and Winifred, being avid of gossip and generally eliminated subjects, "got in their work" with quite fevered haste. They liked the idea of astonishing Robin.

Eileen bent forward and lowered her voice.

"They do say that once Captain Thorpe was fearfully jealous of him and people wonder that he wasn't among the co-respondents." The word "co-respondent" filled her with self-gratulation even though she only whispered it.

"Co-respondents?" said Robin.

They both began to whisper at once--quite shrilly in their haste. They knew Mademoiselle might return at any moment.

"The great divorce case, you know! The Thorpe divorce case the papers are so full of. We get the under housemaid to bring it to us after Mademoiselle has done with it. It's so exciting! Haven't you been reading it? Oh!"

"No, I haven't," answered Robin. "And I don't know about co-respondents, but, if they are anything horrid, I daresay he WAS one of them."

And at that instant Mademoiselle returned and Dowson brought in fresh cakes. The governess, who was to call for her charges, presented herself not long afterwards and the two enterprising little persons were taken away.

"I believe she's JEALOUS of Lord Coombe," Eileen whispered to Winifred, after they reached home.

"So do I," said Winifred wisely. "She can't help but know how he ADORES Mrs. Gareth-Lawless because she's so lovely. He pays for all her pretty clothes. It's silly of her to be jealous--like a baby."

Robin sometimes read newspapers, though she liked books better. Newspapers were not forbidden her. She been reading an enthralling book and had not seen a paper for some days. She at once searched for one and, finding it, sat down and found also the Thorpe Divorce

Case. It was not difficult of discovery, as it filled the principal pages with dramatic evidence and amazing revelations.

Dowson saw her bending over the spread sheets, hot-eyed and intense in her concentration.

"What are you reading, my love?" she asked.

The little flaming face lifted itself. It was unhappy, obstinate, resenting. It wore no accustomed child look and Dowson felt rather startled.

"I'm reading the Thorpe Divorce Case, Dowie," she answered deliberately and distinctly.

Dowie came close to her.

"It's an ugly thing to read, my lamb," she faltered. "Don't you read it. Such things oughtn't to be allowed in newspapers. And you're a little girl, my own dear." Robin's elbow rested firmly on the table and her chin firmly in her hand. Her eyes were not like a bird's.

"I'm nearly thirteen," she said. "I'm growing up. Nobody can stop themselves when they begin to grow up. It makes them begin to find out things. I want to ask you something, Dowie."

"Now, lovey--!" Dowie began with tremor. Both she and Mademoiselle had been watching the innocent "growing up" and fearing a time would come when the widening gaze would see too much. Had it come as soon as this?

Robin suddenly caught the kind woman's wrists in her hands and held them while she fixed her eyes on her. The childish passion of dread and shyness in them broke Dowson's heart because it was so ignorant and young.

"I'm growing up. There's something--I MUST know something! I never knew how to ask about it before." It was so plain to Dowson that she did not know how to ask about it now. "Someone said that Lord Coombe might have been a co-respondent in the Thorpe case----"

"These wicked children!" gasped Dowie. "They're not children at all!"

"Everybody's horrid but you and Mademoiselle," cried Robin, brokenly. She held the wrists harder and ended in a sort of outburst. "If my father were alive--could he bring a divorce suit----And would Lord Coombe----"

Dowson burst into open tears. And then, so did Robin. She dropped Dowson's wrists and threw her arms around her waist, clinging to

it in piteous repentance.

"No, I won't!" she cried out. "I oughtn't to try to make you tell me. You can't. I'm wicked to you. Poor Dowie--darling Dowie! I want to KISS you, Dowie! Let me--let me!"

She sobbed childishly on the comfortable breast and Dowie hugged her close and murmured in a choked voice,

"My lamb! My pet lamb!"