

CHAPTER XX

Sixteen passed by with many other things much more disturbing and important to the world than a girl's birthday; seventeen was gone, with passing events more complicated still and increasingly significant, but even the owners of the hands hovering over the Chessboard, which was the Map of Europe, did not keep a watch on all of them as close as might have been kept with advantage. Girls in their teens are seldom interested in political and diplomatic conditions, and Robin was not fond of newspapers. She worked well and steadily under Mademoiselle's guidance, and her governess realized that she was not losing sight of her plans for self support. She was made aware of this by an occasional word or so, and also by a certain telepathic union between them. Little as she cared for the papers, the child had a habit of closely examining the advertisements every day. She read faithfully the columns devoted to those who "Want" employment or are "Wanted" by employers.

"I look at all the paragraphs which begin 'Wanted, a young lady' or a 'young woman' or a 'young person,' and those which say that 'A young person' or 'a young woman' or 'a young lady' desires a position. I want to find out what is oftenest needed."

She had ceased to be disturbed by the eyes which followed her, or opened a little as she passed. She knew that nothing had come undone or was crooked and that untidiness had nothing to do with

the matter. She accepted being looked at as a part of everyday life. A certain friendliness and pleasure in most of the glances she liked and was glad of. Sometimes men of the flushed, middle-aged or elderly type displeased her by a sort of boldness of manner and gaze, but she thought that they were only silly, giddy, old things who ought to go home to their families and stay with them. Mademoiselle or Dowie was nearly always with her, but, as she was not a French *jemme fille*, this was not because it was supposed that she could not be trusted out alone, but because she enjoyed their affectionate companionship.

There was one man, however, whom she greatly disliked, as young girls will occasionally dislike a member of the opposite sex for no special reason they can wholly explain to themselves.

He was an occasional visitor of her mother's--a personable young Prussian officer of high rank and title. He was blonde and military and good-looking; he brought his bearing and manner from the Court at Berlin, and the click of his heels as he brought them smartly together, when he made his perfect automatic bow, was one of the things Robin knew she was reasonless in feeling she detested in him.

"It makes me feel as if he was not merely bowing as a man who is a gentleman does," she confided to Mademoiselle Valle, "but as if he had been taught to do it and to call attention to it as

if no one had ever known how to do it properly before. It is so flourishing in its stiff way that it's rather vulgar."

"That is only personal fancy on your part," commented Mademoiselle.

"I know it is," admitted Robin. "But--" uneasily, "--but that isn't what I dislike in him most. It's his eyes, I suppose they are handsome eyes. They are blue and full--rather too full. They have a queer, swift stare--as if they plunged into other people's eyes and tried to hold them and say something secret, all in one second. You find yourself getting red and trying to look away."

"I don't," said Mademoiselle astutely--because she wanted to hear the rest, without asking too many questions.

Robin laughed just a little.

"You have not seen him do it. I have not seen him do it myself very often. He comes to call on--Mamma"--she never said "Mother"--"when he is in London. He has been coming for two or three seasons. The first time I saw him I was going out with Dowie and he was just going upstairs. Because the hall is so small, we almost knocked against each other, and he jumped back and made his bow, and he stared so that I felt silly and half frightened. I was only fifteen then."

"And since then?" Mademoiselle Valle inquired.

"When he is here it seems as if I always meet him somewhere. Twice, when Fraulein Hirsch was with me in the Square Gardens, he came and spoke to us. I think he must know her. He was very grand and condescendingly polite to her, as if he did not forget she was only a German teacher and I was only a little girl whose mamma he knew. But he kept looking at me until I began to hate him."

"You must not dislike people without reason. You dislike Lord Coombe."

"They both make me creep. Lord Coombe doesn't plunge his eyes into mine, but he makes me creep with his fishy coldness. I feel as if he were like Satan in his still way."

"That is childish prejudice and nonsense."

"Perhaps the other is, too," said Robin. "But they both make me creep, nevertheless. I would rather DIE than be obliged to let one of them touch me. That was why I would never shake hands with Lord Coombe when I was a little child."

"You think Fraulein Hirsch knows the Baron?" Mademoiselle inquired further.

"I am sure she does. Several times, when she has gone out to walk with me, we have met him. Sometimes he only passes us and salutes, but sometimes he stops and says a few words in a stiff, magnificent way. But he always bores his eyes into mine, as if he were finding out things about me which I don't know myself. He has passed several times when you have been with me, but you may not remember."

Mademoiselle Valle chanced, however, to recall having observed the salute of a somewhat haughty, masculine person, whose military bearing in itself was sufficient to attract attention, so markedly did it suggest the clanking of spurs and accoutrements, and the high lift of a breast bearing orders.

"He is Count von Hillern, and I wish he would stay in Germany," said Robin.

Fraulein Hirsch had not been one of those who returned hastily to her own country, giving no warning of her intention to her employers. She had remained in London and given her lessons faithfully. She was a plain young woman with a large nose and pimpled, colourless face and shy eyes and manner. Robin had felt sure that she stood in awe of the rank and military grandeur of her fellow countryman. She looked shyer than ever when he condescended to halt and address her and her charge--so shy, indeed, that her glances seemed furtive. Robin guessed that she admired him but was too humble to be at ease when he was near her. More than once she had started and turned

red and pale when she saw him approaching, which had caused Robin to wonder if she herself would feel as timid and overpowered by her superiors, if she became a governess. Clearly, a man like Count von Hillern would then be counted among her superiors, and she must conduct herself becomingly, even if it led to her looking almost stealthy. She had, on several occasions, asked Fraulein certain questions about governesses. She had inquired as to the age at which one could apply for a place as instructress to children or young girls. Fraulein Hirsch had begun her career in Germany at the age of eighteen. She had lived a serious life, full of responsibilities at home as one of a large family, and she had perhaps been rather mature for her age. In England young women who wished for situations answered advertisements and went to see the people who had inserted them in the newspapers, she explained. Sometimes, the results were very satisfactory. Fraulein Hirsch was very amiable in her readiness to supply information. Robin did not tell her of her intention to find work of some sort--probably governessing--but the young German woman was possessed of a mind "made in Germany" and was quite well aware of innumerable things her charge did not suspect her of knowing. One of the things she knew best was that the girl was a child. She was not a child herself, and she was an abjectly bitter and wretched creature who had no reason for hope. She lived in small lodgings in a street off Abbey Road, and, in a drawer in her dressing table, she kept hidden a photograph of a Prussian officer with cropped blond head, and handsome prominent blue eyes, arrogantly gazing from beneath

heavy lids which drooped. He was of the type the German woman, young and slim, or mature and stout, privately worships as a god whose relation to any woman can only be that of a modern Jove stooping to command service. In his teens he had become accustomed to the female eye which lifts itself adoringly or casts the furtively excited glance of admiration or appeal. It was the way of mere nature that it should be so--the wise provision of a masculine God, whose world was created for the supply and pleasure of males, especially males of the Prussian Army, whose fixed intention it was to dominate the world and teach it obedience.

To such a man, so thoroughly well trained in the comprehension of the power of his own rank and values, a young woman such as Fraulein Hirsch--subservient and without beauty--was an unconsidered object to be as little regarded as the pavement upon which one walks. The pavement had its uses, and such women had theirs. They could, at least, obey the orders of those Heaven had placed above them, and, if they showed docility and intelligence, might be rewarded by a certain degree of approval.

A presumption, which would have dared to acknowledge to the existence of the hidden photograph, could not have been encompassed by the being of Fraulein Hirsch. She was, in truth, secretly enslaved by a burning, secret, heart-wringing passion which, sometimes, as she lay on her hard bed at night, forced from her thin chest hopeless sobs which she smothered under the bedclothes.

Figuratively, she would have licked the boots of her conquering god, if he would have looked at her--just looked-as if she were human. But such a thing could not have occurred to him. He did not even think of her as she thought of herself, torturingly--as not young, not in any degree good-looking, not geboren, not even female. He did not think of her at all, except as one of those born to serve in such manner as their superiors commanded. She was in England under orders, because she was unobtrusive looking enough to be a safe person to carry on the work she had been given to do. She was cleverer than she looked and could accomplish certain things without attracting any attention whatsoever.

Von Hillern had given her instructions now and then, which had made it necessary for him to see and talk to her in various places. The fact that she had before her the remote chance of seeing him by some chance, gave her an object in life. It was enough to be allowed to stand or sit for a short time near enough to have been able to touch his sleeve, if she had had the mad audacity to do it; to quail before his magnificent glance, to hear his voice, to ALMOST touch his strong, white hand when she gave him papers, to see that he deigned, sometimes, to approve of what she had done, to assure him of her continued obedience, with servile politeness.

She was not a nice woman, or a good one, and she had, from her birth, accepted her place in her world with such finality that her

desires could not, at any time, have been of an elevated nature. If he had raised a haughty hand and beckoned to her, she would have followed him like a dog under any conditions he chose to impose. But he did not raise his hand, and never would, because she had no attractions whatsoever. And this she knew, so smothered her sobs in her bed at night or lay awake, fevered with anticipation when there was a vague chance that he might need her for some reason and command her presence in some deserted park or country road or cheap hotel, where she could take rooms for the night as if she were a passing visitor to London.

One night--she had taken cheap lodgings for a week in a side street, in obedience to orders--he came in about nine o'clock dressed in a manner whose object was to dull the effect of his grandeur and cause him to look as much like an ordinary Englishman as possible.

But, when the door was closed and he stood alone in the room with her, she saw, with the blissful pangs of an abjectly adoring woman, that he automatically resumed his magnificence of bearing. His badly fitting overcoat removed, he stood erect and drawn to his full height, so dominating the small place and her idolatrously cringing being that her heart quaked within her. Oh! to dare to cast her unloveliness at his feet, if it were only to be trampled upon and die there! No small sense of humour existed in her brain to save her from her pathetic idiocy. Romantic humility and touching sacrifice to the worshipped one were the ideals she had read of

in verse and song all her life. Only through such servitude and sacrifice could woman gain man's love--and even then only if she had beauty and the gifts worthy of her idol's acceptance.

It was really his unmitigated arrogance she worshipped and crawled upon her poor, large-jointed knees to adore. Her education, her very religion itself had taught that it was the sign of his nobility and martial high breeding. Even the women of his own class believed something of the same sort--the more romantic and sentimental of them rather enjoying being mastered by it. To Fraulein Hirsch's mental vision, he was a sublimated and more dazzling German Rochester, and she herself a more worthy, because more submissive, Jane Eyre. Ach Gott! His high-held, cropped head--his so beautiful white hands--his proud eyes which deigned to look at her from their drooping lids! His presence filled the shabby room with the atmosphere of a Palace.

He asked her a few questions; he required from her certain notes she had made; without wasting a word or glance he gave her in detail certain further orders.

He stood by the table, and it was, therefore, necessary that she should approach him--should even stand quite near that she might see clearly a sketch he made hastily--immediately afterwards tearing it into fragments and burning it with a match. She was obliged to stand so near him that her skirt brushed his trouser leg. His

nearness, and a vague scent of cigar smoke, mingled with the suggestion of some masculine soap or essence, were so poignant in their effect that she trembled and water rose in her eyes. In fact--and despite her terrified effort to control it, a miserable tear fell on her cheek and stood there because she dared not wipe it away.

Because he realized, with annoyance, that she was trembling, he cast a cold, inquiring glance at her and saw the tear. Then he turned away and resumed his examination of her notes. He was not here to make inquiries as to whether a sheep of a woman was crying or had merely a cold in her head. "Ach!" grovelled poor Hirsch in her secret soul,--his patrician control of outward expression and his indifference to all small and paltry things! It was part, not only of his aristocratic breeding, but of the splendour of his military training.

It was his usual custom to leave her at once, when the necessary formula had been gone through. Tonight--she scarcely dared to believe it--he seemed to have some reason for slight delay. He did not sit down or ask Fraulein Hirsch to do so--but he did not at once leave the room. He lighted a quite marvellous cigar--deigning a slight wave of the admired hand which held it, designating that he asked permission. Oh! if she dared have darted to him with a match! He stood upon the hearth and asked a casual-sounding question or so regarding her employer, her household, her acquaintances,

her habits.

The sole link between them was the asking of questions and the giving of private information, and, therefore, the matter of taste in such matters did not count as a factor. He might ask anything and she must answer. Perhaps it was necessary for her to seek some special knowledge among the guests Mrs. Gareth-Lawless received. But training, having developed in her alertness of mind, led her presently to see that it was not Mrs. Gareth-Lawless he was chiefly interested in--but a member of her family--the very small family which consisted of herself and her daughter.

It was Robin he was enclosing in his network of questions. And she had seen him look at Robin when he had passed or spoken to them. An illuminating flash brought back to her that he had cleverly found out from her when they were to walk together, and where they were to go. She had not been quick enough to detect this before, but she saw it now. Girls who looked like that--yes! But it could not be--serious. An English girl of such family--with such a mother! A momentary caprice, such as all young men of his class amused themselves with and forgot--but nothing permanent. It would not, indeed, be approved in those High Places where obedience was the first commandment of the Decalogue.

But he did not go. He even descended a shade from his inaccessible plane. It was not difficult for him to obtain details of the odd

loneliness of the girl's position. Fraulein Hirsch was quite ready to explain that, in spite of the easy morals and leniency of rank and fashion in England, she was a sort of little outcast from sacred inner circles. There were points she burned to make clear to him, and she made them so. She was in secret fiercely desirous that he should realize to the utmost, that, whatsoever rashness this young flame of loveliness inspired in him, it was NOT possible that he could regard it with any shadow of serious intention. She had always disliked the girl, and now her weak mildness and humility suddenly transformed themselves into something else--a sort of maternal wolfishness. It did not matter what happened to the girl--and whatsoever befell or did not befall her, she--Mathilde Hirsch--could neither gain nor lose hope through it. But, if she did not displease him and yet saved him from final disaster, he would, perhaps, be grateful to her--and perhaps, speak with approval--or remember it--and his Noble Mother most certainly would--if she ever knew. But behind and under and through all these specious reasonings, was the hot choking burn of the mad jealousy only her type of luckless woman can know--and of whose colour she dare not show the palest hint.

"I have found out that, for some reason, she thinks of taking a place as governess," she said.

"Suggest that she go to Berlin. There are good places there," was his answer.

"If she should go, her mother will not feel any anxiety about her," returned Fraulein Hirsch.

"If, then, some young man she meets in the street makes love to her and they run away together, she will not be pursued by her relatives."

Fraulein Hirsch's flat mouth looked rather malicious.

"Her mother is too busy to pursue her, and there is no one else--unless it were Lord Coombe, who is said to want her himself."

Von Hillern shrugged his fine shoulders.

"At his age! After the mother! That is like an Englishman!"

Upon this, Fraulein Hirsch drew a step nearer and fixed her eyes upon his, as she had never had the joy of fixing them before in her life. She dared it now because she had an interesting story to tell him which he would like to hear. It WAS like an Englishman. Lord Coombe had the character of being one of the worst among them, but was too subtle and clever to openly offend people. It was actually said that he was educating the girl and keeping her in seclusion and that it was probably his colossal intention to marry her when she was old enough. He had no heir of his own--and

he must have beauty and innocence. Innocence and beauty his viciousness would have.

"Pah!" exclaimed von Hillern. "It is youth which requires such things--and takes them. That is all imbecile London gossip. No, he would not run after her if she ran away. He is a proud man and he knows he would be laughed at. And he could not get her back from a young man--who was her lover."

Her lover! How it thrilled the burning heart her poor, flat chest panted above. With what triumphant knowledge of such things he said it.

"No, he could not," she answered, her eyes still on his. "No one could."

He laughed a little, confidently, but almost with light indifference.

"If she were missing, no particular search would be made then," he said. "She is pretty enough to suit Berlin."

He seemed to think pleasantly of something as he stood still for a moment, his eyes on the floor. When he lifted them, there was in their blue a hint of ugly exulting, though Mathilde Hirsch did not think it ugly. He spoke in a low voice.

"It will be an exciting--a colossal day when we come to London--as we shall. It will be as if an ocean had collected itself into one huge mountain of a wave and swept in and overwhelmed everything. There will be confusion then and the rushing up of untrained soldiers--and shouts--and yells----"

"And Zeppelins dropping bombs," she so far forgot herself as to pant out, "and buildings crashing and pavements and people smashed! Westminster and the Palaces rocking, and fat fools running before bayonets."

He interrupted her with a short laugh uglier than the gleam in his eyes. He was a trifle excited.

"And all the women running about screaming and trying to hide and being pulled out. We can take any of their pretty, little, high nosed women we choose--any of them."

"Yes," she answered, biting her lip. No one would take her, she knew.

He put on his overcoat and prepared to leave her. As he stood at the door before opening it, he spoke in his usual tone of mere command.

"Take her to Kensington Gardens tomorrow afternoon," he said. "Sit

in one of the seats near the Round Pond and watch the children sailing their boats. I shall not be there but you will find yourself near a quiet, elegant woman in mourning who will speak to you. You are to appear to recognize her as an old acquaintance. Follow her suggestions in everything."

After this he was gone and she sat down to think it over.