

CHAPTER XXI

She saw him again during the following week and was obliged to tell him that she had not been able to take her charge to Kensington Gardens on the morning that he had appointed but that, as the girl was fond of the place and took pleasure in watching the children sailing their boats on the Round Pond, it would be easy to lead her there. He showed her a photograph of the woman she would find sitting on a particular bench, and he required she should look at it long enough to commit the face to memory. It was that of a quietly elegant woman with gentle eyes.

"She will call herself Lady Etynge," he said. "You are to remember that you once taught her little girl in Paris. There must be no haste and no mistakes. It be well for them to meet--by accident--several times."

Later he aid to her:

"When Lady Etynge invites her to go to her house, you will, of course, go with her. You will not stay. Lady Etynge will tell you what to do."

In words, he did not involve himself by giving any hint of his intentions. So far as expression went, he might have had none, whatever. Her secret conclusion was that he knew, if he could see

the girl under propitious circumstances--at the house of a clever and sympathetic acquaintance, he need have no shadow of a doubt as to the result of his efforts to please her. He knew she was a lonely, romantic creature, who had doubtless read sentimental books and been allured by their heroes. She was, of course, just ripe for young peerings into the land of love making. His had been no peerings, thought the pale Hirsch sadly. What girl--or woman--could resist the alluring demand of his drooping eyes, if he chose to allow warmth to fill them? Thinking of it, she almost gnashed her teeth. Did she not see how he would look, bending his high head and murmuring to a woman who shook with joy under his gaze? Had she not seen it in her own forlorn, hopeless dreams?

What did it matter if what the world calls disaster befell the girl? Fraulein Hirsch would not have called it disaster. Any woman would have been paid a thousand times over. His fancy might last a few months. Perhaps he would take her to Berlin--or to some lovely secret spot in the mountains where he could visit her. What heaven--what heaven! She wept, hiding her face on her hot, dry hands.

But it would not last long--and he would again think only of the immense work--the august Machine, of which he was a mechanical part--and he would be obliged to see and talk to her, Mathilde Hirsch, having forgotten the rest. She could only hold herself decently in check by telling herself again and again that it was

only natural that such things should come and go in his magnificent life, and that the sooner it began the sooner it would end.

It was a lovely morning when her pupil walked with her in Kensington Gardens, and, quite naturally, strolled towards the Round Pond. Robin was happy because there were flutings of birds in the air, gardeners were stuffing crocuses and hyacinths into the flower beds, there were little sweet scents floating about and so it was Spring. She pulled a bare looking branch of a lilac bush towards her and stooped and kissed the tiny brown buttons upon it, half shyly.

"I can't help it when I see the first ones swelling on the twigs. They are working so hard to break out into green," she said. "One loves everything at this time--everything! Look at the children round the pond. That fat, little boy in a reefer and brown leather leggings is bursting with joy. Let us go and praise his boat, Fraulein."

They went and Robin praised the boat until its owner was breathless with rapture. Fraulein Hirsch, standing near her, looked furtively at all the benches round the circle, giving no incautiously interested glance to any one of them in particular. Presently, however, she said:

"I think that is Lady Etynge sitting on the third bench from

here. I said to you that I had heard she was in London. I wonder if her daughter is still in the Convent at Tours?"

When Robin returned, she saw a quiet woman in perfect mourning recognize Fraulein Hirsch with a a bow and smile which seemed to require nearer approach.

"We must go and speak to her." Fraulein Hirsch said. "I know she wil wish me to present you. She is fond of young girls--because of Helene."

Robin went forward prettily. The woman was gentle looking and attracting. She had a sweet manner and was very kind to Fraulein Hirsch. She seemed to know her well and to like her. Her daughter, Helene, was still in the Convent at Tours but was expected home very shortly. She would be glad to find that Fraulein Hirsch was in London.

"I have turned the entire top story of my big house into a pretty suite for her. She has a fancy for living high above the street," smiled Lady Etynge, indulgently. Perhaps she was a "Mother" person, Robin thought.

Both her looks and talk were kind, and she was very nice in her sympathetic interest in the boats and the children's efforts to sail them.

"I often bring my book here and forget to read, because I find I am watching them," she said. "They are so eager and so triumphant when a boat gets across the Pond."

She went away very soon and Robin watched her out of sight with interest.

They saw her again a few days later and talked a little more. She was not always near the Pond when they came, and they naturally did not go there each time they walked together, though Fraulein Hirsch was fond of sitting and watching the children.

She had been to take tea with her former employer, she told Robin one day, and she was mildly excited by the preparations for Helene, who had been educated entirely in a French convent and was not like an English girl at all. She had always been very delicate and the nuns seemed to know how to take care of her and calm her nerves with their quiet ways.

"Her mother is rather anxious about her coming to London. She has, of course, no young friends here and she is so used to the quiet of convent life," the Fraulein explained. "That is why the rooms at the top of the house have been arranged for her. She will hear so little sound. I confess I am anxious about her myself. Lady Etynge is wondering if she can find a suitable young companion to

live in the house with her. She must be a young lady and perfectly educated--and with brightness and charm. Not a person like myself, but one who can be treated as an equal and a friend--almost a playmate."

"It would be an agreeable position," commented Robin, thoughtfully.

"Extremely so," answered Fraulein Hirsch. "Helene is a most lovable and affectionate girl. And Lady Etynge is rich enough to pay a large salary. Helene is her idol. The suite of rooms is perfect. In Germany, girls are not spoiled in that way. It is not considered good for them."

It was quite natural, since she felt an interest in Helene, that, on their next meeting, Robin should find pleasure in sitting on the green bench near the girl's mother and hear her speak of her daughter. She was not diffuse or intimate in her manner. Helene first appeared in the talk as a result of a polite inquiry made by Fraulein Hirsch. Robin gathered, as she listened, that this particular girl was a tenderly loved and cared for creature and was herself gentle and intelligent and loving. She sounded like the kind of a girl one would be glad to have for a friend. Robin wondered and wondered--if she would "do." Perhaps, out of tactful consideration for the feelings of Fraulein Hirsch who would not "do"--because she was neither bright, nor pretty, nor a girl--Lady Etynge touched but lightly on her idea that she might find a sort

of sublimated young companion for her daughter.

"It would be difficult to advertise for what one wants," she said.

"Yes. To state that a girl must be clever and pretty and graceful, and attractive, would make it difficult for a modest young lady to write a suitable reply," said Fraulein Hirsch grimly, and both Lady Etynge and Robin smiled.

"Among your own friends," Lady Etynge said to Robin, a little pathetically in her yearning, "do you know of anyone--who might know of anyone who would fit in? Sometimes there are poor little cousins, you know?"

"Or girls who have an independent spirit and would like to support themselves," said the Fraulein. "There are such girls in these advanced times."

"I am afraid I don't know anyone," answered Robin. Modesty also prevented her from saying that she thought she did. She herself was well educated, she was good tempered and well bred, and she had known for some time that she was pretty.

"Perhaps Fraulein Hirsch may bring you in to have tea with me some afternoon when you are out," Lady Etynge said kindly before she left them. "I think you would like to see Helene's rooms. I should

be glad to hear what another girl thinks of them."

Robin was delighted. Perhaps this was a way opening to her. She talked to Mademoiselle Valle about it and so glowed with hope that Mademoiselle's heart was moved.

"Do you think I might go?" she said. "Do you think there is any chance that I might be the right person? AM I nice enough--and well enough educated, and ARE my manners good?"

She did not know exactly where Lady Etynge lived, but believed it was one of those big houses in a certain dignified "Place" they both knew--a corner house, she was sure, because--by mere chance--she had one day seen Lady Etynge go into such a house as if it were her own. She did not know the number, but they could ask Fraulein.

Fraulein Hirsch was quite ready with detail concerning her former patroness and her daughter. She obviously admired them very much. Her manner held a touch of respectful reverence. She described Helene's disposition and delicate nerves and the perfection of the nuns' treatment of her.

She described the beauty of the interior of the house, its luxury and convenience, and the charms of the suite of apartments prepared for Helene. She thought the number of the house was No. 97 A. Lady

Etynge was the kindest employer she had ever had. She believed that Miss Gareth-Lawless and Helene would be delighted with each other, if they met, and her impression was that Lady Etynge privately hoped they would become friends.

Her mild, flat face was so modestly amiable that Mademoiselle Valle, who always felt her unattractive femininity pathetic, was a little moved by her evident pleasure in having been the humble means of providing Robin with acquaintances of an advantageous kind.

No special day had been fixed upon for the visit and the cup of tea. Robin was eager in secret and hoped Lady Etynge would not forget to remind them of her invitation.

She did not forget. One afternoon--they had not seen her for several days and had not really expected to meet her, because they took their walk later than usual--they found her just rising from her seat to go home as they appeared.

"Our little encounters almost assume the air of appointments," she said. "This is very nice, but I am just going away, I am sorry to say. I wonder--" she paused a moment, and then looked at Fraulein Hirsch pleasantly; "I wonder if, in about an hour, you would bring Miss Gareth-Lawless to me to have tea and tell me if she thinks Helene will like her new rooms. You said you would like to see

them," brightly to Robin.

"You are very kind. I should like it so much," was Robin's answer.

Fraulein Hirsch was correctly appreciative of the condescension shown to her. Her manner was the perfection of the exact shade of unobtrusive chaperonship. There was no improper suggestion of a mistaken idea that she was herself a guest, or, indeed, anything, in fact, but a proper appendage to her charge. Robin had never been fond of Fraulein as she was fond of Mademoiselle and Dowie, still she was not only an efficient teacher, but also a good walker and very fond of long tramps, which Mademoiselle was really not strong enough for, but which Robin's slender young legs rejoiced in.

The two never took cabs or buses, but always walked everywhere. They walked on this occasion, and, about an hour later, arrived at a large, corner house in Berford Place. A tall and magnificently built footman opened the door for them, and they were handed into a drawing room much grander than the one Robin sometimes glanced into as she passed it, when she was at home. A quite beautiful tea equipage awaited them on a small table, but Lady Etynge was not in the room.

"What a beautiful house to live in," said Robin, "but, do you know, the number ISN'T 97 A. I looked as we came in, and it is No. 25."

"Is it? I ought to have been more careful," answered Fraulein Hirsch. "It is wrong to be careless even in small matters."

Almost immediately Lady Etynge came in and greeted them, with a sort of gentle delight. She drew Robin down on to a sofa beside her and took her hand and gave it a light pat which was a caress.

"Now you really ARE here," she said, "I have been so busy that I have been afraid I should not have time to show you the rooms before it was too late to make a change, if you thought anything might be improved."

"I am sure nothing can improve them," said Robin, more dewy-eyed than usual and even a thought breathless, because this was really a sort of adventure, and she longed to ask if, by any chance, she would "do." And she was so afraid that she might lose this amazingly good opportunity, merely because she was too young and inexperienced to know how she ought to broach the subject. She had not thought yet of asking Mademoiselle Valle how it should be done.

She was not aware that she looked at Lady Etynge with a heavenly, little unconscious appeal, which made her enchanting. Lady Etynge looked at her quite fixedly for an instant.

"What a child you are! And what a colour your cheeks and lips are!" she said. "You are much--much prettier than Helene, my dear."

She got up and brought a picture from a side table to show it to her.

"I think she is lovely," she said. "Is it because I am her mother?"

"Oh, no! Not because you are her mother!" exclaimed Robin. "She is angelic!"

She was rather angelic, with her delicate uplifted face and her communion veil framing it mistily.

The picture was placed near them and Robin looked at it many times as they took their tea. To be a companion to a girl with a face like that would be almost too much to ask of one's luck. There was actual yearning in Robin's heart. Suddenly she realized that she had missed something all her life, without knowing that she missed it. It was the friendly nearness of youth like her own. How she hoped that she might make Lady Etynge like her. After tea was over, Lady Etynge spoke pleasantly to Fraulein Hirsch.

"I know that you wanted to register a letter. There is a post-office just around the corner. Would you like to go and register it while I take Miss Gareth-Lawless upstairs? You have seen the rooms. You

will only be away a few minutes."

Fraulein Hirsch was respectfully appreciative again. The letter really was important. It contained money which she sent monthly to her parents. This month she was rather late, and she would be very glad to be allowed to attend to the matter without losing a post.

So she went out of the drawing-room and down the stairs, and Robin heard the front door close behind her with a slight thud. She had evidently opened and closed it herself without waiting for the footman.

The upper rooms in London houses--even in the large ones--are usually given up to servants' bedrooms, nurseries, and school rooms. Stately staircases become narrower as they mount, and the climber gets glimpses of apartments which are frequently bare, whatsoever their use, and, if not grubby in aspect, are dull and uninteresting.

But, in Lady Etynge's house, it was plain that a good deal had been done. Stairs had been altered and widened, walls had been given fresh and delicate tints, and one laid one's hand on cream white balustrades and trod on soft carpets. A good architect had taken interest in the problems presented to him, and the result was admirable. Partitions must have been removed to make rooms larger

and of better shape.

"Nothing could be altered without spoiling it!" exclaimed Robin, standing in the middle of a sitting room, all freshness and exquisite colour--the very pictures on the wall being part of the harmony.

All that a girl would want or love was there. There was nothing left undone--unremembered. The soft Chesterfield lounge, which was not too big and was placed near the fire, the writing table, the books, the piano of satinwood inlaid with garlands; the lamp to sit and read by.

"How glad she must be to come back to anyone who loves her so," said Robin.

Here was a quilted basket with three Persian kittens purring in it, and she knelt and stroked their fluffiness, bending her slim neck and showing how prettily the dark hair grew up from it. It was, perhaps, that at which Lady Etynge was looking as she stood behind her and watched her. The girl-nymph slenderness and flexibility of her leaning body was almost touchingly lovely.

There were several other rooms and each one was, in its way, more charming than the other. A library in Dresden blue and white, and with peculiarly pretty windows struck the last note of cosiness. All the rooms had pretty windows with rather small square panes

enclosed in white frames.

It was when she was in this room that Robin took her courage in her hands. She must not let her chance go by. Lady Etynge was so kind. She wondered if it would seem gauche and too informal to speak now.

She stood quite upright and still, though her voice was not quite steady when she began.

"Lady Etynge," she said, "you remember what Fraulein Hirsch said about girls who wish to support themselves? I--I am one of them. I want very much to earn my own living. I think I am well educated. I have been allowed to read a good deal and my teachers, Mademoiselle Valle and Fraulein Hirsch, say I speak and write French and German well for an English girl. If you thought I could be a suitable companion for Miss Etynge, I--should be very happy."

How curiously Lady Etynge watched her as she spoke. She did not look displeased, but there was something in her face which made Robin afraid that she was, perhaps, after all, not the girl who was fortunate enough to quite "do."

She felt her hopes raised a degree, however, when Lady Etynge smiled at her.

"Do you know, I feel that is very pretty of you!" she said. "It quite delights me--as I am an idolizing mother--that my mere talk of Helene should have made you like her well enough to think you might care to live with her. And I confess I am modern enough to be pleased with your wishing to earn your own living."

"I must," said Robin. "I MUST! I could not bear not to earn it!" She spoke a little suddenly, and a flag of new colour fluttered in her cheek.

"When Helene comes, you must meet. If you like each other, as I feel sure you will, and if Mrs. Gareth-Lawless does not object--if it remains only a matter of being suitable--you are suitable, my dear--you are suitable."

She touched Robin's hand with the light pat which was a caress, and the child was radiant.

"Oh, you are kind to me!" The words broke from her involuntarily. "And it is such GOOD fortune! Thank you, thank you, Lady Etynge."

The flush of her joy and relief had not died out before the footman, who had opened the door, appeared on the threshold. He was a handsome young fellow, whose eyes were not as professionally impassive as his face. A footman had no right to dart a swift side look at one as people did in the street. He did dart such a glance.

Robin saw, and she was momentarily struck by its being one of those she sometimes objected to.

Otherwise his manner was without flaw. He had only come to announce to his mistress the arrival of a caller.

When Lady Etynge took the card from the salver, her expression changed. She even looked slightly disturbed.

"Oh, I am sorry," she murmured, "I must see her," lifting her eyes to Robin. "It is an old friend merely passing through London. How wicked of me to forget that she wrote to say that she might dash in at any hour."

"Please!" pled Robin, prettily. "I can run away at once. Fraulein Hirsch must have come back. Please--"

"The lady asked me particularly to say that she has only a few minutes to stay, as she is catching a train," the footman decorously ventured.

"If that is the case," Lady Etynge said, even relievedly, "I will leave you here to look at things until I come back. I really want to talk to you a little more about yourself and Helene. I can't let you go." She looked back from the door before she passed through it. "Amuse yourself, my dear," and then she added hastily to the

man.

"Have you remembered that there was something wrong with the latch, William? See if it needs a locksmith."

"Very good, my lady."

She was gone and Robin stood by the sofa thrilled with happiness and relief. How wonderful it was that, through mere lucky chance, she had gone to watch the children sailing their boats! And that Fraulein Hirsch had seen Lady Etynge! What good luck and how grateful she was! The thought which passed through her mind was like a little prayer of thanks. How strange it would be to be really intimate with a girl like herself--or rather like Helene. It made her heart beat to think of it. How wonderful it would be if Helene actually loved her, and she loved Helene. Something sprang out of some depths of her being where past things were hidden. The something was a deadly little memory. Donal! Donal! It would be--if she loved Helene and Helene loved her--as new a revelation as Donal. Oh! she remembered.

She heard the footman doing something to the latch of the door, which caused it to make a clicking sound. He was obeying orders and examining it. As she involuntarily glanced at him, he--bending over the door handle--raised his eyes sideways and glanced at her. It was an inexcusable glance from a domestic, because it was

actually as if he were taking the liberty of privately summing her up--taking her points in for his own entertainment. She so resented the unprofessional bad manners of it, that she turned away and sauntered into the Dresden blue and white library and sat down with a book.

She was quite relieved, when, only a few minutes later, he went away having evidently done what he could.

The book she had picked up was a new novel and opened with an attention-arresting agreeableness, which led her on. In fact it led her on further and, for a longer time than she was aware of. It was her way to become wholly absorbed in books when they allured her; she forgot her surroundings and forgot the passing of time. This was a new book by a strong man with the gift which makes alive people, places, things. The ones whose lives had taken possession of his being in this story were throbbing with vital truth.

She read on and on because, from the first page, she knew them as actual pulsating human creatures. They looked into her face, they laughed, she heard their voices, she CARED for every trivial thing that happened to them--to any of them. If one of them picked a flower, she saw how he or she held it and its scent was in the air.

Having been so drawn on into a sort of unconsciousness of all

else, it was inevitable that, when she suddenly became aware that she did not see her page quite clearly, she should withdraw her eyes from her page and look about her. As she did so, she started from her comfortable chair in amazement and some alarm. The room had become so much darker that it must be getting late. How careless and silly she had been. Where was Fraulein Hirsch?

"I am only a strange girl and Lady Etynge might so easily have forgotten me," passed through her mind. "Her friend may have stayed and they may have had so much to talk about, that, of course, I was forgotten. But Fraulein Hirsch--how could she!"

Then, remembering the subservient humility of the Fraulein's mind, she wondered if it could have been possible that she had been too timid to do more than sit waiting--in the hall, perhaps--afraid to allow the footman to disturb Lady Etynge by asking her where her pupil was. The poor, meek, silly thing.

"I must get away without disturbing anyone," she thought, "I will slip downstairs and snatch Fraulein Hirsch from her seat and we will go quietly out. I can write a nice note to Lady Etynge tomorrow, and explain. I HOPE she won't mind having forgotten me. I must make her feel sure that it did not matter in the least. I'll tell her about the book."

She replaced the book on the shelf from which she had taken it and

passed through into the delightful sitting room. The kittens were playing together on the hearth, having deserted their basket. One of them gave a soft, airy pounce after her and caught at her dress with tiny claws, rolling over and over after his ineffectual snatch.

She had not heard the footman close the door when he left the room, but she found he must have done so, as it was now shut. When she turned the handle it did not seem to work well, because the door did not open as it ought to have done. She turned it again and gave it a little pull, but it still remained tightly shut. She turned it again, still with no result, and then she tried the small latch. Perhaps the man had done some blundering thing when he had been examining it. She remembered hearing several clicks. She turned the handle again and again. There was no key in the keyhole, so he could not have bungled with the key. She was quite aghast at the embarrassment of the situation.

"How CAN I get out without disturbing anyone, if I cannot open the door!" she said. "How stupid I shall seem to Lady Etynge! She won't like it. A girl who could forget where she was--and then not be able to open a door and be obliged to bang until people come!"

Suddenly she remembered that there had been a door in the bedroom which had seemed to lead out into the hall. She ran into the room in such a hurry that all three kittens ran frisking after her.

She saw she had not been mistaken. There was a door. She went to

it and turned the handle, breathless with excitement and relief. But the handle of that door also would not open it. Neither would the latch. And there was no key.

"Oh!" she gasped. "Oh!"

Then she remembered the electric bell near the fireplace in the sitting room. There was one by the fireplace here, also. No, she would ring the one in the sitting room. She went to it and pressed the button. She could not hear the ghost of a sound and one could generally hear SOMETHING like one. She rang again and waited. The room was getting darker. Oh, how COULD Fraulein Hirsch--how could she?

She waited--she waited. Fifteen minutes by her little watch--twenty minutes--and, in their passing, she rang again. She rang the bell in the library and the one in the bedroom--even the one in the bathroom, lest some might be out of order. She slowly ceased to be embarrassed and self-reproachful and began to feel afraid, though she did not know quite what she was afraid of. She went to one of the windows to look at her watch again in the vanishing light, and saw that she had been ringing the bells for an hour. She automatically put up a hand and leaned against the white frame of one of the decorative small panes of glass. As she touched it, she vaguely realized that it was of such a solidity that it felt, not like wood but iron. She drew her hand away quickly, feeling a

sweep of unexplainable fear--yes, it was FEAR. And why should she so suddenly feel it? She went back to the door and tried again to open it--as ineffectively as before. Then she began to feel a little cold and sick. She returned to the Chesterfield and sat down on it helplessly.

"It seems as if--I had been locked in!" she broke out, in a faint, bewildered wail of a whisper. "Oh, WHY--did they lock the doors!"