

CHAPTER XXII

She had known none of the absolute horrors of life which were possible in that underworld which was not likely to touch her own existence in any form.

"Why," had argued Mademoiselle Valle, "should one fill a white young mind with ugly images which would deface with dark marks and smears, and could only produce unhappiness and, perhaps, morbid broodings? One does not feel it is wise to give a girl an education in crime. One would not permit her to read the Newgate Calendar for choice. She will be protected by those who love her and what she must discover she will discover. That is Life."

Which was why her first discovery that neither door could be opened, did not at once fill her with horror. Her first arguments were merely those of a girl who, though her brain was not inactive pulp, had still a protected girl's outlook. She had been overwhelmed by a sense of the awkwardness of her position and by the dread that she would be obliged to disturb and, almost inevitably, embarrass and annoy Lady Etynge. Of course, there had been some bungling on the part of the impudent footman--perhaps actually at the moment when he had given his sidelong leer at herself instead of properly attending to what he was trying to do. That the bedroom was locked might be the result of a dozen ordinary reasons.

The first hint of an abnormality of conditions came after she had rung the bells and had waited in vain for response to her summons. There were servants whose business it was to answer bells at once. If ALL the bells were out of order, why were they out of order when Helene was to return in a few days and her apartment was supposed to be complete? Even to the kittens--even to the kittens!

"It seems as if I had been locked in," she had whispered to the silence of the room. "Why did they lock the doors?"

Then she said, and her heart began to thump and race in her side:

"It has been done on purpose. They don't intend to let me out--for some HORRIBLE reason!"

Perhaps even her own growing panic was not so appalling as a sudden rushing memory of Lady Etynge, which, at this moment, overthrew her. Lady Etynge! Lady Etynge! She saw her gentle face and almost affectionately watching eyes. She heard her voice as she spoke of Helene; she felt the light pat which was a caress.

"No! No!" she gasped it, because her breath had almost left her.

"No! No! She couldn't! No one could! There is NOTHING as wicked--as that!"

Bat, even as she cried out, the overthrow was utter, and she threw

herself forward on the arm of the couch and sobbed--sobbed with the passion she had only known on the day long ago when she had crawled into the shrubs and groveled in the earth. It was the same kind of passion--the shaken and heart-riven woe of a creature who has trusted and hoped joyously and has been forever betrayed. The face and eyes had been so kind. The voice so friendly! Oh, how could even the wickedest girl in the world have doubted their sincerity. Unfortunately--or fortunately--she knew nothing whatever of the mental processes of the wicked girls of the world, which was why she lay broken to pieces, sobbing--sobbing, not at the moment because she was a trapped thing, but because Lady Etynge had a face in whose gentleness her heart had trusted and rejoiced.

When she sat upright again, her own face, as she lifted it, would have struck a perceptive onlooker as being, as it were, the face of another girl. It was tear-stained and wild, but this was not the cause of its change. The soft, bird eyes were different--suddenly, amazingly older than they had been when she had believed in Helene.

She had no experience which could reveal to her in a moment the monstrosity of her danger, but all she had ever read, or vaguely gathered, of law breakers and marauders of society, collected itself into an advancing tidal wave of horror.

She rose and went to the window and tried to open it, but it was not intended to open. The decorative panes were of small size

and of thick glass. Her first startled impression that the white framework seemed to be a painted metal was apparently founded on fact. A strong person might have bent it with a hammer, but he could not have broken it. She examined the windows in the other rooms and they were of the same structure.

"They are made like that," she said to herself stonily, "to prevent people from getting OUT."

She stood at the front one and looked down into the broad, stately "Place." It was a long way to look down, and, even if the window could be opened, one's voice would not be heard. The street lamps were lighted and a few people were to be seen walking past unhurriedly.

"In the big house almost opposite they are going to give a party. There is a red carpet rolled out. Carriages are beginning to drive up. And here on the top floor, there is a girl locked up--And they don't know!"

She said it aloud, and her voice sounded as though it were not her own. It was a dreadful voice, and, as she heard it, panic seized her.

Nobody knew--nobody! Her mother never either knew or cared where she was, but Dowie and Mademoiselle always knew. They would be

terrified. Fraulein Hirsch had, perhaps, been told that her pupil had taken a cab and gone home and she would return to her lodgings thinking she was safe.

Then--only at this moment, and with a suddenness which produced a sense of shock--she recalled that it was Fraulein Hirsch who had presented her to Lady Etynge. Fraulein Hirsch herself! It was she who had said she had been in her employ and had taught Helene--Helene! It was she who had related anecdotes about the Convent at Tours and the nuns who were so wise and kind! Robin's hand went up to her forehead with a panic-stricken gesture. Fraulein Hirsch had made an excuse for leaving her with Lady Etynge--to be brought up to the top of the house quite alone--and locked in. Fraulein Hirsch had KNOWN! And there came back to her the memory of the furtive eyes whose sly, adoring sidelooks at Count Von Hillern had always--though she had tried not to feel it--been, somehow, glances she had disliked--yes, DISLIKED!

It was here--by the thread of Fraulein Hirsch--that Count Von Hillern was drawn into her mind. Once there, it was as if he stood near her--quite close--looking down under his heavy, drooping lids with stealthy, plunging eyes. It had always been when Fraulein Hirsch had walked with her that they had met him--almost as if by arrangement.

There were only two people in the world who might--because she

herself had so hated them--dislike and choose in some way to punish her. One was Count Von Hillern. The other was Lord Coombe. Lord Coombe, she knew, was bad, vicious, did the things people only hinted at without speaking of them plainly. A sense of instinctive revolt in the strength of her antipathy to Von Hillern made her feel that he must be of the same order.

"If either of them came into this room now and locked the door behind him, I could not get out."

She heard herself say it aloud in the strange girl's dreadful voice, as she had heard herself speak of the party in the big house opposite. She put her soft, slim hand up to her soft, slim throat.

"I could not get out," she repeated.

She ran to the door and began to beat on its panels. By this time, she knew it would be no use and yet she beat with her hands until they were bruised and then she snatched up a book and beat with that. She thought she must have been beating half an hour when she realized that someone was standing outside in the corridor, and the someone said, in a voice she recognized as belonging to the leering footman,

"May as well keep still, Miss. You can't hammer it down and no

one's going to bother taking any notice," and then his footsteps retired down the stairs. She involuntarily clenched her hurt hands and the shuddering began again though she stood in the middle of the room with a rigid body and her head thrown fiercely back.

"If there are people in the world as hideous--and monstrous as THIS--let them kill me if they want to. I would rather be killed than live! They would HAVE to kill me!" and she said it in a frenzy of defiance of all mad and base things on earth.

Her peril seemed to force her thought to delve into unknown dark places in her memory and dig up horrors she had forgotten--newspaper stories of crime, old melodramas and mystery romances, in which people disappeared and were long afterwards found buried under floors or in cellars. It was said that the Berford Place houses, winch were old ones, had enormous cellars under them.

"Perhaps other girls have disappeared and now are buried in the cellars," she thought.

And the dreadful young voice added aloud.

"Because they would HAVE to kill me."

One of the Persian kittens curled up in the basket wakened because he heard it and stretched a sleepy paw and mewed at her.

Coombe House was one of the old ones, wearing somewhat the aspect of a stately barrack with a fine entrance. Its court was enclosed at the front by a stone wall, outside which passing London roared in low tumult. The court was surrounded by a belt of shrubs strong enough to defy the rain of soot which fell quietly upon them day and night.

The streets were already lighted for the evening when Mademoiselle Valle presented herself at the massive front door and asked for Lord Coombe. The expression of her face, and a certain intensity of manner, caused the serious-looking head servant, who wore no livery, to come forward instead of leaving her to the footmen.

"His lordship engaged with--a business person--and must not be disturbed," he said. "He is also going out."

"He will see me," replied Mademoiselle Valle. "If you give him this card he will see me."

She was a plainly dressed woman, but she had a manner which removed her entirely from the class of those who merely came to importune. There was absolute certainty in the eyes she fixed with steadiness on the man's face. He took her card, though he hesitated.

"If he does not see me," she added, "he will be very much displeased."

"Will you come in, ma'am, and take a seat for a moment?" he ventured. "I will inquire."

The great hall was one of London's most celebrated. A magnificent staircase swept up from it to landings whose walls were hung with tapestries the world knew. In a gilded chair, like a throne, Mademoiselle Valle sat and waited.

But she did not wait long. The serious-looking man without livery returned almost immediately. He led Mademoiselle into a room like a sort of study or apartment given up to business matters. Mademoiselle Valle had never seen Lord Coombe's ceremonial evening effect more flawless. Tall, thin and finely straight, he waited in the centre of the room. He was evidently on the point of going out, and the light-textured satin-lined overcoat he had already thrown on revealed, through a suggestion of being winged, that he wore in his lapel a delicately fresh, cream-coloured carnation.

A respectable, middle-class looking man with a steady, blunt-featured face, had been talking to him and stepped quietly aside as Mademoiselle entered. There seemed to be no question of his leaving the room.

Coombe met his visitor half way:

"Something has alarmed you very much?" he said.

"Robin went out with Fraulein Hirsch this afternoon," she said quickly. "They went to Kensington Gardens. They have not come back--and it is nine o'clock. They are always at home by six."

"Will you sit down," he said. The man with the steady face was listening intently, and she realized he was doing so and that, somehow, it was well that he should.

"I do not think there is time for any one to sit down," she said, speaking more quickly than before. "It is not only that she has not come back. Fraulein Hirsch has presented her to one of her old employers--a Lady Etynge. Robin was delighted with her. She has a daughter who is in France--,"

"Marguerite staying with her aunt in Paris," suddenly put in the voice of the blunt-featured man from his side of the room.

"Helene at a Covent in Tours," corrected Mademoiselle, turning a paling countenance towards him and then upon Coombe. "Lady Etynge spoke of wanting to engage some nice girl as a companion to her daughter, who is coming home. Robin thought she might have the good fortune to please her. She was to go to Lady Etynge's house to tea sine afternoon and be shown the rooms prepared for Helene. She thought the mother charming."

"Did she mention the address?" Coombe asked at once.

"The house was in Berford Place—a large house at a corner. She chanced to see Lady Etynge go into it one day or we should not have known. She did not notice the number. Fraulein Hirsch thought it was 97A. I have the Blue Book, Lord Coombe--through the Peerage--through the Directory! There is no Lady Etynge and there is no 97A in Berford Place! That is why I came here."

The man who had stood aside, stepped forward again. It was as if he answered some sign, though Lord Coombe at the moment crossed the hearth and rang the bell.

"Scotland Yard knows that, ma'am," said the man. "We've had our eyes on that house for two weeks, and this kind of thing is what we want."

"The double brougham," was Coombe's order to the servant who answered his ring. Then he came back to Mademoiselle.

"Mr. Barkstow is a detective," he said. "Among the other things he has done for me, he has, for some time, kept a casual eye on Robin. She is too lovely a child and too friendless to be quite safe. There are blackguards who know when a girl has not the usual family protection. He came here to tell me that she had been

seen sitting in Kensington Gardens with a woman Scotland Yard has reason to suspect."

"A black 'un!" said Barkstow savagely. "If she's the one we think she is-a black, poisonous, sly one with a face that no girl could suspect."

Coombe's still countenance was so deadly in the slow lividness, which Mademoiselle saw began to manifest itself, that she caught his sleeve with a shaking hand.

"She's nothing but a baby!" she said. "She doesn't know what a baby she is. I can see her eyes frantic with terror! She'd go mad."

"Good God!" he said, in a voice so low it scarcely audible.

He almost dragged her out of the room, though, as they passed through the hall, the servants only saw that he had given the lady his arm-and two of the younger footmen exchanged glances with each other which referred solely to the inimitableness of the cut of his evening overcoat.

When they entered the carriage, Barkstow entered with them and Mademoiselle Valle leaned forward with her elbows on her knees and her face clutched in her hands. She was trying to shut out from her mental vision a memory of Robin's eyes.

"If--if Fraulein Hirsch is--not true," she broke out once. "Count von Hillern is concerned. It has come upon me like a flash. Why did I not see before?"

The party at the big house, where the red carpet was rolled across the pavement, was at full height when they drove into the Place. Their brougham did not stop at the corner but at the end of the line of waiting carriages.

Coombe got out and looked up and down the thoroughfare.

"It must be done quietly. There must be no scandal," he said. "The policeman on the beat is an enormous fellow. You will attend to him, Barkstow," and Barkstow nodded and strolled away.

Coombe walked up the Place and down on the opposite side until he was within a few yards of the corner house. When he reached this point, he suddenly quickened his footsteps because he saw that someone else was approaching it with an air of intention. It was a man, not quite as tall as himself but of heavier build and with square held shoulders. As the man set his foot upon the step, Coombe touched him on the arm and said something in German.

The man started angrily and then suddenly stood quite still and erect.

"It will be better for us to walk up the Place together," Lord Coombe said, with perfect politeness.

If he could have been dashed down upon the pavement and his head hammered in with the handle of a sword, or if he could have been run through furiously again and again, either or both of these things would have been done. But neither was possible. It also was not possible to curse aloud in a fashionable London street. Such curses as one uttered must be held in one's foaming mouth between one's teeth. Count von Hillern knew this better than most men would have known it. Here was one of those English swine with whom Germany would deal in her own way later.

They walked back together as if they were acquaintances taking a casual stroll.

"There is nothing which would so infuriate your--Master-as a disgraceful scandal," Lord Coombe's highbred voice suggested undisturbedly. "The high honour of a German officer-the knightly bearing of a wearer of the uniform of the All Highest-that sort of thing you know. All that sort of thing!"

Von Hillern ground out some low spoken and quite awful German words. If he had not been trapped-if he had been in some quiet by-street!

"The man walking ahead of us is a detective from Scotland Yard. The particularly heavy and rather martial tread behind us is that of a policeman much more muscular than either of us. There is a ball going on in the large house with the red carpet spread across the pavement. I know the people who are giving it. There are a good many coachmen and footmen about. Most of them would probably recognize me."

It became necessary for Count von Hillern actually to wipe away certain flecks of foam from his lips, as he ground forth again more varied and awful sentiments in his native tongue.

"You are going back to Berlin," said Coombe, coldly. "If we English were not such fools, you would not be here. You are, of course, not going into that house."

Von Hillern burst into a derisive laugh.

"You are going yourself," he said. "You are a worn-out old ROUE, but you are mad about her yourself in your senile way."

"You should respect my age and decrepitude," answered Coombe. "A certain pity for my gray hairs would become your youth. Shall we turn here or will you return to your hotel by some other way?"

He felt as if the man might burst a blood vessel if he were obliged to further restrain himself.

Von Hillern wheeled at the corner and confronted him.

"There will come a day--" he almost choked.

"Der Toy? Naturally," the chill of Coombe's voice was a sound to drive this particular man at this particular, damnably-thwarted moment, raving mad. And not to be able to go mad! Not to be able!

"Swine of a doddering Englishman! Who would envy you--trembling on your lean shanks--whatsoever you can buy for yourself. I spit on you-spit!"

"Don't," said Coombe. "You are sputtering to such an extent that you really ARE, you know."

Von Hillern whirled round the corner.

Coombe, left alone, stood still a moment.

"I was in time," he said to himself, feeling somewhat nauseated.

"By extraordinary luck, I was in time. In earlier days one would have said something about 'Providence'." And he at once walked back.