

CHAPTER XXIII

It was not utterly dark in the room, though Robin, after passing her hands carefully over the walls, had found no electric buttons within reach nor any signs of candles or matches elsewhere. The night sky was clear and brilliant with many stars, and this gave her an unshadowed and lighted space to look at. She went to the window and sat down on the floor, huddled against the wall with her hands clasped round her knees, looking up. She did this in the effort to hold in check a rising tide of frenzy which threatened her. Perhaps, if she could fix her eyes on the vault full of stars, she could keep herself from going out of her mind. Though, perhaps, it would be better if she DID go out of her mind, she found herself thinking a few seconds later.

After her first entire acceptance of the hideous thing which had happened to her, she had passed through nerve breaking phases of terror-stricken imaginings. The old story of the drowning man across whose brain rush all the images of life, came back to her. She did not know where or when or how she had ever heard or read of the ghastly incidents which came trooping up to her and staring at her with dead or mad eyes and awful faces. Perhaps they were old nightmares-perhaps a kind of delirium had seized her. She tried to stop their coming by saying over and over again the prayers Dowie had taught her when she was a child. And then she thought, with a sob which choked her, that perhaps they were only prayers

for a safe little creature kneeling by a white bed-and did not apply to a girl locked up in a top room, which nobody knew about. Only when she thought of Mademoiselle Valle and Dowie looking for her--with all London spread out before their helplessness--did she cry. After that, tears seemed impossible. The images trooped by too close to her. The passion hidden within her being--which had broken out when she tore the earth under the shrubbery, and which, with torture staring her in the face, had leaped in the child's soul and body and made her defy Andrews with shrieks--leaped up within her now. She became a young Fury, to whom a mad fight with monstrous death was nothing. She told herself that she was strong for a girl--that she could tear with her nails, she could clench her teeth in a flesh, she could shriek, she could battle like a young madwoman so that they would be FORCED to kill her. This was one of the images which rose up before her again yet again, A hideous-hideous thing, which would not remain away.

She had not had any food since the afternoon cup of tea and she began to feel the need of it. If she became faint-! She lifted her face desperately as she said it, and saw the immense blue darkness, powdered with millions of stars and curving over her--as it curved over the hideous house and all the rest of the world. How high--how immense--how fathomlessly still it was--how it seemed as if there could be nothing else--that nothing else could be real! Her hands were clenched together hard and fiercely, as she scrambled to her knees and uttered a of prayer--not a child's--rather

the cry of a young Fury making a demand.

"Perhaps a girl is Nothing," she cried, "-a girl locked up in a room! But, perhaps, she is Something--she may be real too! Save me--save me! But if you won't save me, let me be killed!"

She knelt silent after it for a few minutes and then she sank down and lay on the floor with her face on her arm.

How it was possible that even young and worn-out as she was, such peace as sleep could overcome her at such a time, one cannot say. But in the midst of her torment she was asleep.

But it was not for long. She wakened with a start and sprang to her feet shivering. The carriages were still coming and going with guests for the big house opposite. It could not be late, though she seemed to have been in the place for years--long enough to feel that it was the hideous centre of the whole earth and all sane and honest memories were a dream. She thought she would begin to walk up and down the room.

But a sound she heard at this very instant made her stand stock still. She had known there would be a sound at last--she had waited for it all the time--she had known, of course, that it would come, but she had not even tried to guess whether she would hear it early or late. It would be the sound of the turning of the

handle of the locked door. It had come. There it was! The click of the lock first and then the creak of the turned handle!

She went to the window again and stood with her back against it, so that her body was outlined against the faint light. Would the person come in the dark, or would he carry a light? Something began to whirl in her brain. What was the low, pumping thump she seemed to hear and feel at the same time? It was the awful thumping of her heart.

The door opened--not stealthily, but quite in the ordinary way. The person who came in did not move stealthily either. He came in as though he were making an evening call. How tall and straight his body was, with a devilish elegance of line against the background of light in the hall. She thought she saw a white flower on his lapel as his overcoat fell back. The leering footman had opened the door for him.

"Turn on the lights." A voice she knew gave the order, the leering footman obeyed, touching a spot high on the wall.

She had vaguely and sickeningly felt almost sure that it would be either Count von Hillern or Lord Coombe--and it was not Count von Hillern! The cold wicked face--the ironic eyes which made her creep--the absurd, elderly perfection of dress--even the flawless flower--made her flash quake with repulsion. If Satan came into

the room, he might look like that and make one's revolting being quake so.

"I thought--it might be you," the strange girl's voice said to him aloud.

"Robin," he said.

He was moving towards her and, as she threw out her madly clenched little hands, he stopped and drew back.

"Why did you think I might come?" he asked.

"Because you are the kind of a man who would do the things only devils would do. I have hated-hated-hated you since I was a baby. Come and kill me if you like. Call the footman back to help you, if you like. I can't get away. Kill me--kill me--kill me!"

She was lost in her frenzy and looked as if she were mad.

One moment he hesitated, and then he pointed politely to the sofa.

"Go and sit down, please," he suggested. It was no more than a courteous suggestion. "I shall remain here. I have no desire to approach you--if you'll pardon my saying so."

But she would not leave the window.

"It is natural that you should be overwrought," he said.

"This is a damnable thing. You are too young to know the worst of it."

"You are the worst of it!" she cried. "You."

"No" as the chill of his even voice struck her, she wondered if he were really human. "Von Hillern would have been the worst of it. I stopped him at the front door and knew how to send him away. Now, listen, my good child. Hate me as ferociously as you like. That is a detail. You are in the house of a woman whose name stands for shame and infamy and crime."

"What are YOU doing in it--" she cried again, "--in a place where girls are trapped-and locked up in top rooms--to be killed?"

"I came to take you away. I wish to do it quietly. It would be rather horrible if the public discovered that you have spent some hours here. If I had not slipped in when they were expecting von Hillern, and if the servants were not accustomed to the quiet entrance of well dressed men, I could not have got in without an open row and the calling of the policemen,--which I wished to avoid. Also, the woman downstairs knows me and realized that I was not

lying when I said the house was surrounded and she was on the point of being 'run in'. She is a woman of broad experience, and at once knew that she might as well keep quiet."

Despite his cold eyes and the bad smile she hated, despite his almost dandified meticulous attire and the festal note of his white flower, which she hated with the rest--he was, perhaps, not lying to her. Perhaps for the sake of her mother he had chosen to save her--and, being the man he was, he had been able to make use of his past experiences.

She began to creep away from the window, and she felt her legs, all at once, shaking under her. By the time she reached the Chesterfield sofa she fell down by it and began to cry. A sort of hysteria seized her, and she shook from head to foot and clutched at the upholstery with weak hands which clawed. She was, indeed, an awful, piteous sight. He was perhaps not lying, but she was afraid of him yet.

"I told the men who are waiting outside that if I did not bring you out in half an hour, they were to break into the house. I do not wish them to break in. We have not any time to spare. What you are doing is quite natural, but you must try and get up." He stood by her and said this looking down at her slender, wrung body and lovely groveling head.

He took a flask out of his overcoat pocket--and it was a gem of goldsmith's art. He poured some wine into its cup and bent forward to hold it out to her.

"Drink this and try to stand on your feet," he said. He knew better than to try to help her to rise--to touch her in any way. Seeing to what the past hours had reduced her, he knew better. There was mad fear in her eyes when she lifted her head and threw out her hand again.

"No! No!" she cried out. "No, I will drink nothing!" He understood at once and threw the wine into the grate.

"I see," he said. "You might think it might be drugged. You are right. It might be. I ought to have thought of that." He returned the flask to his pocket. "Listen again. You must. The time will soon be up and we must not let those fellows break in and make a row that will collect a crowd. We must go at once. Mademoiselle Valle is waiting for you in my carriage outside. You will not be afraid to drink wine she gives you."

"Mademoiselle!" she stammered.

"Yes. In my carriage, which is not fifty yards from the house. Can you stand on your feet?" She got up and stood but she was still shuddering all over.

"Can you walk downstairs? If you cannot, will you let me carry you? I am strong enough-in spite of my years."

"I can walk," she whispered.

"Will you take my arm?"

She looked at him for a moment with awful, broken-spirited eyes.

"Yes. I will take your arm."

He offered it to her with rigid punctiliousness of manner. He did not even look at her. He led her out of the room and down the three flights of stairs. As they passed by the open drawing-room door, the lovely woman who had called herself Lady Etynge stood near it and watched them with eyes no longer gentle.

"I have something to say to you, Madam," he said; "When I place this young lady in the hands of her governess, I will come back and say it."

"Is her governess Fraulein Hirsch?" asked the woman lightly.

"No. She is doubtless on her way back to Berlin--and von Hillern will follow her."

There was only the first floor flight of stairs now. Robin could scarcely see her way. But Lord Coombe held her up firmly and, in a few moments more, the leering footman, grown pale, opened the large door, they crossed the pavement to the carriage, and she was helped in and fell, almost insensible, across Mademoiselle Valle's lap, and was caught in a strong arm which shook as she did.

"Ma cherie," she heard, "The Good God! Oh, the good--good God!--And Lord Coombe! Lord Coombe!"

Coombe had gone back to the house. Four men returned with him, two in plain clothes and two heavily-built policemen. They remained below, but Coombe went up the staircase with the swift lightness of a man of thirty.

He merely stood upon the threshold of the drawing-room. This was what he said, and his face was entirely white his eyes appalling.

"My coming back to speak to you is--superfluous--and the result of pure fury. I allow it to myself as mere shameless indulgence. More is known against you than this--things which have gone farther and fared worse. You are not young and you are facing years of life in prison. Your head will be shaved--your hands worn and blackened and your nails broken with the picking of oakum. You will writhe

in hopeless degradation until you are done for. You will have time, in the night blackness of your cell, to remember--to see faces--to hear cries. Women such as you should learn what hell on earth means. You will learn."

When he ended, the woman hung with her back to the wall she had staggered against, her mouth opening and shutting helplessly but letting forth no sound.

He took out an exquisitely fresh handkerchief and touched his forehead because it was damp. His eyes were still appalling, but his voice suddenly dropped and changed.

"I have allowed myself to feel like a madman," he said. "It has been a rich experience--good for such a soul as I own."

He went downstairs and walked home because his carriage had taken Robin and Mademoiselle back to the slice of a house.