

CHAPTER XXIV

Von Hillern made no further calls on Mrs. Gareth-Lawless. His return to Berlin was immediate and Fraulein Hirsch came no more to give lessons in German. Later, Coombe learned from the mam with the steady, blunt-featured face, that she had crossed the Channel on a night boat not many hours after Von Hillern had walked away from Berford Place. The exact truth was that she had been miserably prowling about the adjacent streets, held in the neighbourhood by some self-torturing morbidness, half thwarted helpless passion, half triumphing hatred of the young thing she had betrayed. Up and down the streets she had gone, round and round, wringing her lean fingers together and tasting on her lips the salt of tears which rolled down her cheeks--tears of torment and rage.

There was the bitterness of death in what, by a mere trick of chance, came about. As she turned a corner telling herself for the hundredth time that she must go home, she found herself face to face with a splendid figure swinging furiously along. She staggered at the sight of the tigerish rage in the white face she recognized with a gasp. It was enough merely to behold it. He had met with some disastrous humiliation!

As for him, the direct intervention of that Heaven whose special care he was, had sent him a woman to punish--which, so far, was at least one thing arranged as it should be. He knew so well how he

could punish her with his mere contempt and displeasure--as he could lash a spaniel crawling at his feet. He need not deign to tell her what had happened, and he did not. He merely drew back and stood in stiff magnificence looking down at her.

"It is through some folly of yours," he dropped in a voice of vitriol. "Women are always foolish. They cannot hold their tongues or think clearly. Return to Berlin at once. You are not of those whose conduct I can commend to be trusted in the future."

He was gone before she could have spoken even if she had dared. Sobbing gasps caught her breath as she stood and watched him striding pitilessly and superbly away with, what seemed to her abject soul, the swing and tread of a martial god. Her streaming tears tasted salt indeed. She might never see him again--even from a distance. She would be disgraced and flung aside as a blundering woman. She had obeyed his every word and done her straining best, as she had licked the dust at his feet--but he would never cast a glance at her in the future or utter to her the remotest word of his high commands. She so reeled as she went her wretched way that a good-natured policeman said to her as he passed,

"Steady on, my girl. Best get home and go to bed."

To Mrs. Gareth-Lawless, it was stated by Coombe that Fraulein Hirsch had been called back to Germany by family complications.

That august orders should recall Count Von Hillern, was easily understood. Such magnificent persons never shone upon society for any length of time.

That Feather had been making a country home visit when her daughter had faced tragedy was considered by Lord Coombe as a fortunate thing.

"We will not alarm Mrs. Gareth-Lawless by telling her what has occurred," he said to Mademoiselle Valle. "What we most desire is that no one shall suspect that the hideous thing took place. A person who was forgetful or careless might, unintentionally, let some word escape which--"

What he meant, and what Mademoiselle Valle knew he meant--also what he knew she knew he meant--was that a woman, who was a heartless fool, without sympathy or perception, would not have the delicacy to feel that the girl must be shielded, and might actually see a sort of ghastly joke in a story of Mademoiselle Valle's sacrosanct charge simply walking out of her enshrining arms into such a "galere" as the most rackets and adventurous of pupils could scarcely have been led into. Such a point of view would have been quite possible for Feather--even probable, in the slightly spiteful attitude of her light mind.

"She was away from home. Only you and I and Dowie know," answered

Mademoiselle.

"Let us remain the only persons who know," said Coombe. "Robin will say nothing."

They both knew that. She had been feverish and ill for several days and Dowie had kept her in bed saying that she had caught cold. Neither of the two women had felt it possible to talk to her. She had lain staring with a deadly quiet fixedness straight before her, saying next to nothing. Now and then she shuddered, and once she broke into a mad, heart-broken fit of crying which she seemed unable to control.

"Everything is changed," she said to Dowie and Mademoiselle who sat on either side of her bed, sometimes pressing her head down onto a kind shoulder, sometimes holding her hand and patting it. "I shall be afraid of everybody forever. People who have sweet faces and kind voices will make me shake all over. Oh! She seemed so kind--so kind!"

It was Dowie whose warm shoulder her face hidden on this time, and Dowie was choked with sobs she dared not let loose. She could only squeeze hard and kiss the "silk curls all in a heap"--poor, tumbled curls, no longer a child's!

"Aye, my lamb!" she managed to say. "Dowie's poor pet lamb!"

"It's the knowing that kind eyes--kind ones--!" she broke off, panting. "It's the KNOWING! I didn't know before! I knew nothing. Now, it's all over. I'm afraid of all the world!"

"Not all, cherie," breathed Mademoiselle.

She sat upright against her pillows. The mirror on a dressing table reflected her image--her blooming tear-wet youth, framed in the wonderful hair falling a shadow about her. She stared at the reflection hard and questioningly.

"I suppose," her voice was pathos itself in its helplessness, "it is because what you once told me about being pretty, is true. A girl who looks like THAT," pointing her finger at the glass, "need not think she can earn her own living. I loathe it," in fierce resentment at some bitter injustice. "It is like being a person under a curse!"

At this Dowie broke down openly and let her tears run fast. "No, no! You mustn't say it or think it, my dearie!" she wept. "It might call down a blight on it. You a young thing like a garden flower! And someone--somewhere--God bless him--that some day'll glory in it--and you'll glory too. Somewhere he is--somewhere!"

"Let none of them look at me!" cried Robin. "I loathe them, too.

I hate everything--and everybody--but you two--just you two."

Mademoiselle took her in her arms this time when she sobbed again.

Mademoiselle knew how at this hour it seemed to her that all her world was laid bare forever more. When the worst of the weeping was over and she lay quiet, but for the deep catching breaths which lifted her breast in slow, childish shudders at intervals, she held Mademoiselle Valle's hand and looked at her with a faint, wry smile.

"You were too kind to tell me what a stupid little fool I was when I talked to you about taking a place in an office!" she said. "I know now that you would not have allowed me to do the things I was so sure I could do. It was only my ignorance and conceit. I can't answer advertisements. Any bad person can say what they choose in an advertisement. If that woman had advertised, she would have described Helene. And there was no Helene." One of the shuddering catches of her breath broke in here. After it, she said, with a pitiful girlishness of regret: "I--I could SEE Helene. I have known so few people well enough to love them. No girls at all. I though--perhaps--we should begin to LOVE each other. I can't bear to think of that--that she never was alive at all. It leaves a sort of empty place."

When she had sufficiently recovered herself to be up again, Mademoiselle Valle said to her that she wished her to express her

gratitude to Lord Coombe.

"I will if you wish it," she answered.

"Don't you feel that it is proper that you should do it? Do you not wish it yourself?" inquired Mademoiselle. Robin looked down at the carpet for some seconds.

"I know," she at last admitted, "that it is proper. But I don't wish to do it."

"No?" said Mademoiselle Valle.

Robin raised her eyes from the carpet and fixed them on her.

"It is because of--reasons," she said. "It is part of the horror I want to forget. Even you mayn't know what it has done to me. Perhaps I am turning into a girl with a bad mind. Bad thoughts keep swooping down on me--like great black ravens. Lord Coombe saved me, but I think hideous things about him. I heard Andrews say he was bad when I was too little to know what it meant. Now, I KNOW, I remember that HE knew because he chose to know--of his own free will. He knew that woman and she knew him. HOW did he know her?" She took a forward step which brought her nearer to Mademoiselle. "I never told you but I will tell you now," she confessed, "When the door opened and I saw him standing against the light I--I did

not think he had come to save me."

"MON DIEU!" breathed Mademoiselle in soft horror.

"He knows I am pretty. He is an old man but he knows. Fraulein Hirsch once made me feel actually sick by telling me, in her meek, sly, careful way, that he liked beautiful girls and the people said he wanted a young wife and had his eye on me. I was rude to her because it made me so furious. HOW did he know that woman so well? You see how bad I have been made!"

"He knows nearly all Europe. He has seen the dark corners as well as the bright places. Perhaps he has saved other girls from her. He brought her to punishment, and was able to do it because he has been on her track for some time. You are not bad--but unjust. You have had too great a shock to be able to reason sanely just yet."

"I think he will always make me creep a little," said Robin, "but I will say anything you think I ought to say."

On an occasion when Feather had gone again to make a visit in the country, Mademoiselle came into the sitting room with the round window in which plants grew, and Coombe followed her. Robin looked up from her book with a little start and then stood up.

"I have told Lord Coombe that you wish--that I wish you to thank him," Mademoiselle Valle said.

"I came on my own part to tell you that any expression of gratitude is entirely unnecessary," said Coombe.

"I MUST be grateful. I AM grateful." Robin's colour slowly faded as she said it. This was the first time she had seen him since he had supported her down the staircase which mounted to a place of hell.

"There is nothing to which I should object so much as being regarded as a benefactor," he answered definitely, but with entire lack of warmth. "The role does not suit me. Being an extremely bad man," he said it as one who speaks wholly without prejudice, "my experience is wide. I chance to know things. The woman who called herself Lady Etynge is of a class which--which does not count me among its clients. I had put certain authorities on her track--which was how I discovered your whereabouts when Mademoiselle Valle told me that you had gone to take tea with her. Mere chance you see. Don't be grateful to me, I beg of you, but to Mademoiselle Valle."

"Why," faltered Robin, vaguely repelled as much as ever, "did it matter to you?"

"Because," he answered--Oh, the cold inhumanness of his gray

eye!--"you happened to live in--this house."

"I thought that was perhaps the reason," she said--and she felt that he made her "creep" even a shade more.

"I beg your pardon," she added, suddenly remembering, "Please sit down."

"Thank you," as he sat. "I will because I have something more to say to you."

Robin and Mademoiselle seated themselves also and listened.

"There are many hideous aspects of existence which are not considered necessary portions of a girl's education," he began.

"They ought to be," put in Robin, and her voice was as hard as it was young.

It was a long and penetrating look he gave her.

"I am not an instructor of Youth. I have not been called upon to decide. I do not feel it my duty to go even now into detail."

"You need not," broke in the hard young voice. "I know everything in the world. I'm BLACK with knowing."

"Mademoiselle will discuss that point with you. What you have, unfortunately, been forced to learn is that it is not safe for a girl--even a girl without beauty--to act independently of older people, unless she has found out how to guard herself against--devils." The words broke from him sharply, with a sudden incongruous hint of ferocity which was almost startling. "You have been frightened," he said next, "and you have discovered that there are devils, but you have not sufficient experience to guard yourself against them."

"I have been so frightened that I shall be a coward--a coward all my life. I shall be afraid of every face I see--the more to be trusted they look, the more I shall fear them. I hate every one in the world!"

Her quite wonderful eyes--so they struck Lord Coombe--flamed with a child's outraged anguish. A thunder shower of tears broke and rushed down her cheeks, and he rose and, walking quietly to the window full of flowers, stood with his back to her for a few moments. She neither cared nor knew whether it was because her hysteric emotion bored or annoyed him, or because he had the taste to realize that she would not wish to be looked at. Unhappy youth can feel no law but its own.

But all was over during the few moments, and he turned and walked back to his chair.

"You want very much to do some work which will insure your entire independence--to take some situation which will support you without aid from others? You are not yet prepared to go out and take the first place which offers. You have been--as you say--too hideously frightened, and you know there are dangers in wandering about unguided. Mademoiselle Valle," turning his head, "perhaps you will tell her what you know of the Duchess of Darte?"

Upon which, Mademoiselle Valle took hold of her hand and entered into a careful explanation.

"She is a great personage of whom there can be no doubt. She was a lady of the Court. She is of advanced years and an invalid and has a liking for those who are pretty and young. She desires a companion who is well educated and young and fresh of mind. The companion who had been with her for many years recently died. If you took her place you would live with her in her town house and go with her to the country after the season. Your salary would be liberal and no position could be more protected and dignified. I have seen and talked to her grace myself, and she will allow me to take you to her, if you desire to go."

"Do not permit the fact that she has known me for many years to prejudice you against the proposal," said Coombe. "You might perhaps regard it rather as a sort of guarantee of my conduct in

the matter. She knows the worst of me and still allows me to retain her acquaintance. She was brilliant and full of charm when she was a young woman, and she is even more so now because she is--of a rarity! If I were a girl and might earn my living in her service, I should feel that fortune had been good to me--good."

Robin's eyes turned from one of them to the other--from Coombe to Mademoiselle Valle, and from Mademoiselle to Coombe pathetically.

"You--you see--what has been done to me," she said. "A few weeks ago I should have KNOWN that God was providing for me--taking care of me. And now--I am still afraid. I feel as if she would see that--that I am not young and fresh any more but black with evil. I am afraid of her--I am afraid of you," to Coombe, "and of myself."

Coombe rose, evidently to go away.

"But you are not afraid of Mademoiselle Valle," he put it to her.

"She will provide the necessary references for the Duchess. I will leave her to help you to decide."

Robin rose also. She wondered if she ought not to hold out her hand. Perhaps he saw her slight movement. He himself made none.

"I remember you objected to shaking hands as a child," he said, with an impersonal civil smile, and the easy punctiliousness of

his bow made it impossible for her to go further.