

CHAPTER XXIX - THE RED LIGHT

It was an evening without stars, but fair, sufficient wind to make her Ladyship cling haughtily to his arm as they turned corners. Many of the visitors were in the garden, some grouped round a quartet of gaily attired minstrels, but more sitting in little arbours or prowling in search of an arbour to sit in; the night was so dark that when our two passed beyond the light of the hotel windows they could scarce see the shrubs they brushed against; cigars without faces behind them sauntered past; several times they thought they had found an unoccupied arbour at last, when they heard the clink of coffee-cups.

"I believe the castle dates from the fifteenth century," Tommy would then say suddenly, though it was not of castles he had been talking.

With a certain satisfaction he noticed that she permitted him, without comment, to bring in the castle thus and to drop it the moment the emergency had passed. But he had little other encouragement. Even when she pressed his arm it was only as an intimation that the castle was needed.

"I can't even make her angry," he said wrathfully to himself.

"You answer not a word," he said in great dejection to her.

"I am afraid to speak," she admitted. "I don't know who may hear."

"Alice," he said eagerly, "what would you say if you were not afraid to speak?"

They had stopped, and he thought she trembled a little on his arm, but he could not be sure. He thought--but he was thinking too much again; at least, Lady Pippinworth seemed to come to that conclusion, for with a galling little laugh she moved on. He saw with amazing clearness that he had thought sufficiently for one day.

On coming into the garden with her, and for some time afterwards, he had been studying her so coolly, watching symptoms rather than words, that there is nothing to compare the man to but a doctor who, while he is chatting, has his finger on your pulse. But he was not so calm now. Whether or not he had stirred the woman, he was rapidly firing himself.

When next he saw her face by the light of a window, she at the same instant turned her eyes on him; it was as if each wanted to know correctly how the other had been looking in the darkness, and the effect was a challenge.

Like one retreating a step, she lowered her eyes. "I am tired," she said. "I shall go in."

"Let us stroll round once more."

"No, I am going in."

"If you are afraid----" he said, with a slight smile.

She took his arm again. "Though it is too bad of me to keep you out," she said, as they went on, "for you are shivering. Is it the night air that makes you shiver?" she asked mockingly.

But she shivered a little herself, as if with a presentiment that she might be less defiant if he were less thoughtful. For a month or more she had burned to teach him a lesson, but there was a time before that when, had she been sure he was in earnest, she would have preferred to be the pupil.

Two ladies came out of an arbour where they had been drinking coffee, and sauntered towards the hotel. It was a tiny building, half concealed in hops and reached by three steps, and Tommy and his companion took possession. He groped in the darkness for a chair for her, and invited her tenderly to sit down. She said she preferred to stand. She was by the open window, her fingers drumming on the sill. Though he could not see her face, he knew exactly how she was looking.

"Sit down," he said, rather masterfully.

"I prefer to stand," she repeated languidly.

He had a passionate desire to take her by the shoulders, but put his hand on hers instead, and she permitted it, like one disdainful but helpless. She said something unimportant about the stillness.

"Is it so still?" he said in a low voice. "I seem to hear a great noise. I think it must be the beating of my heart."

"I fancy that is what it is," she drawled.

"Do you hear it?"

"No."

"Did you ever hear your own heart beat, Alice?"

"No."

He had both her hands now. "Would you like to hear it?"

She pulled away her hands sharply. "Yes," she replied with defiance.

"But you pulled away your hands first," said he.

He heard her breathe heavily for a moment, but she said nothing. "Yes," he said, as if she had spoken, "it is true."

"What is true?"

"What you are saying to yourself just now--that you hate me."

She beat the floor with her foot.

"How you hate me, Alice!"

"Oh, no."

"Yes, indeed you do."

"I wonder why," she said, and she trembled a little.

"I know why." He had come close to her again. "Shall I tell you why?"

She said "No," hurriedly.

"I am so glad you say No." He spoke passionately, and yet there was banter in his voice, or so it seemed to her. "It is because you fear to be told; it is because you had hoped that I did not know."

"Tell me why I hate you!" she cried.

"Tell me first that you do."

"Oh, I do, I do indeed!" She said the words in a white heat of hatred.

Before she could prevent him he had raised her hand to his lips.

"Dear Alice!" he said.

"Why is it?" she demanded.

"Listen!" he said. "Listen to your heart, Alice; it is beating now. It is telling you why. Does it need an interpreter? It is saying you hate me because you think I don't love you."

"Don't you?" she asked fiercely.

"No," Tommy said.

Her hands were tearing each other, and she could not trust herself to speak. She sat down deadly pale in the chair he had offered her.

"No man ever loved you," he said, leaning over her with his hand on the back of the chair. "You are smiling at that, I know; but it is true, Lady Disdain. They may have vowed to blow their brains out, and seldom did it; they may have let you walk over them, and they may have become your fetch-and-carry, for you were always able to drive them crazy; but love does not bring men so low. They tried hard to love you, and it was not that they could not love; it was that you were unlovable. That is a terrible thing to a woman. You think you let them try to love you, that you might make them your slaves when they succeeded; but you made them your slaves because they failed. It is a power given to your cold and selfish nature in place of the capacity for being able to be loved, with which women not a hundredth part as beautiful as you are dowered, and you have a raging desire, Alice, to exercise it over me as over the others; but you can't."

Had he seen her face then, it might have warned him to take care; but he heard her words only, and they were not at all in keeping with her face.

"I see I can't," was what she cried, almost in a whisper.

"It is all true, Alice, is it not?"

"I suppose so. I don't know; I don't care." She swung round in her chair and caught his sleeve. Her hands clung to it. "Say you love me now," she said. "I cannot live without your love after this. What shall I do to make you love me? Tell me, and I will do it."

He could not stop himself, for he mistrusted her still.

"I will not be your slave," he said, through his teeth. "You shall be mine."

"Yes, yes."

"You shall submit to me in everything. If I say 'come,' you shall come to wheresoever it may be; and if I say 'stay,' and leave you for ever, you shall stay."

"Very well," she said eagerly. She would have her revenge when he was her slave.

"You can continue to be the haughty Lady Disdain to others, but you shall be only obedient little Alice to me."

"Very well." She drew his arm towards her and pressed her lips upon it. "And for that you will love me a little, won't you? You will love me at last, won't you?" she entreated.

He was a masterful man up to a certain point only. Her humility now tapped him in a new place, and before he knew what he was about he began to run pity.

"To humiliate you so, Alice! I am a dastard. I am not such a dastard as you think me. I wanted to know that you would be willing to do all these things, but I would never have let you do them."

"I am willing to do them."

"No, no." It was he who had her hands now. "It was brutal, but I did it for you, Alice--for you. Don't you see I was doing it only to make a woman of you? You were always adorable, but in a coat of mail that would let love neither in nor out. I have been hammering at it to break it only and free my glorious Alice. We had to fight, and one of us had to give in. You would have flung me away if I had yielded--I had to win to save you."

"Now I am lost indeed," he was saying to himself, even as it came rushing out of him, and what appalled him most was that worse had probably still to come. He was astride two horses, and both were at the gallop. He flung out his arms as if seeking for something to check him.

As he did so she had started to her feet, listening. It seemed to her that there was someone near them.

He flung out his arms for help, and they fell upon Lady Pippinworth and went round her. He drew her to him. She could hear no breathing now but his.

"Alice, I love you, for you are love itself; it is you I have been chasing since first love rose like a bird at my feet; I never had a passing fancy for any other woman; I always knew that somewhere in the world there must be you, and sometime this starless night and you for me. You were hidden behind walls of ice; no man had passed them; I broke them down and love leaped to love, and you lie here, my beautiful, love in the arms of its lover."

He was in a frenzy of passion now; he meant every word of it; and her intention was to turn upon him presently and mock him, this man with whom she had been playing. Oh, the jeering things she had to say! But she could not say them yet; she would give her fool another moment--so she thought, but she was giving it to herself; and as she delayed she was in danger of melting in his arms.

"What does the world look like to you, my darling? You are in it for the first time. You were born but a moment ago. It is dark, that you may not be blinded before you have used your eyes. These are your eyes, dear eyes that do not yet know their purpose; they are for looking at me, little Alice, and mine are for looking into yours. I cannot see you; I have never seen the face of my love--oh, my love, come into the light that I may see your face."

They did not move. Her head had fallen on his shoulder. She was to give it but a moment, and then----But the moment had passed and still her hair pressed his cheek. Her eyes were closed. He seemed to have found the way to woo her. Neither of them spoke. Suddenly they jumped apart. Lady Pippinworth stole to the door. They held their breath and listened.

It was not so loud now, but it was distinctly heard. It had been heavy breathing, and now she was trying to check it and half succeeding--but at the cost of little cries. They both knew it was a woman, and that she was in the arbour, on the other side of the little table. She must have been there when they came in.

"Who is that?"

There was no answer to him save the checked breathing and another broken cry. She moved, and it helped him to see vaguely the outlines of a girl who seemed to be drawing back from him in terror. He thought she was crouching now in the farthest corner.

"Come away," he said. But Lady Pippinworth would not let him go. They must know who this woman was. He remembered that a match-stand usually lay on the tables of those arbours, and groped until he found one.

"Who are you?"

He struck a match. They were those French matches that play an infernal interlude before beginning to burn. While he waited he knew that she was begging him, with her hands and with cries that were too little to be words, not to turn its light on her. But he did.

Then she ceased to cower. The girlish dignity that had been hers so long came running back to her. As she faced him there was even a crooked smile upon her face.

"I woke up," she said, as if the words had no meaning to herself, but might have some to him.

The match burned out before he spoke, but his face was terrible. "Grizel!" he said, appalled; and then, as if the discovery was as awful to her as to him, she uttered a cry of horror and sped out into the night. He called her name again, and sprang after her; but the hand of another woman detained him.

"Who is this girl?" Lady Pippinworth demanded fiercely; but he did not answer. He recoiled from her with a shudder that she was not likely to forget, and hurried on. All that night he searched for Grizel in vain.