

CHAPTER XVI--Dealing with that which was done in the Panelled Parlour

He followed her to the Panelled Parlour, the one to which she had taken Osmonde on the day of their bliss, the one in which in the afternoon she received those who came to pay court to her over a dish of tea. In the mornings none entered it but herself or some invited guest. 'Twas not the room she would have chosen for him; but when he said to her, "'Twere best your ladyship took me to some private place," she had known there was no other so safe.

When the door was closed behind them, and they stood face to face, they were a strange pair to behold--she with mad defiance battling with mad despair in her face; he with the mocking which every woman who had ever trusted him or loved him had lived to see in his face when all was lost. Few men there lived who were as vile as he, his power of villainy lying in that he knew not the meaning of man's shame or honour.

"Now," she said, "tell me the worst."

"'Tis not so bad," he answered, "that a man should claim his own, and swear that no other man shall take it from him. That I have sworn, and that I will hold to."

"Your own!" she said--"your own you call it--villain!"

"My own, since I can keep it," quoth he. "Before you were my Lord of Dunstanwolde's you were mine--of your own free will."

"Nay, nay," she cried. "God! through some madness I knew not the awfulness of--because I was so young and had known naught but evil--and you were so base and wise."

"Was your ladyship an innocent?" he answered. "It seemed not so to me."

"An innocent of all good," she cried--"of all things good on earth--of all that I know now, having seen manhood and honour."

"His Grace of Osmonde has not been told this," he said; "and I should make it all plain to him."

"What do you ask, devil?" she broke forth. "What is't you ask?"

"That you shall not be the Duchess of Osmonde," he said, drawing near to her; "that you shall be the wife of Sir John Oxon, as you once called yourself for a brief space, though no priest had mumbled over us--"

"Who was't divorced us?" she said, gasping; "for I was an honest thing, though I knew no other virtue. Who was't divorced us?"

"I confess," he answered, bowing, "that 'twas I--for the time being. I was young, and perhaps fickle--"

"And you left me," she cried, "and I found that you had come but for a bet--and since I so bore myself that you could not boast, and since I was not a rich woman whose fortune would be of use to you, you followed another and left me--me!"

"As his Grace of Osmonde will when I tell him my story," he answered. "He is not one to brook that such things can be told of the mother of his heirs."

She would have shrieked aloud but that she clutched her throat in time.

"Tell him!" she cried, "tell him, and see if he will hear you. Your word against mine!"

"Think you I do not know that full well," he answered, and he brought forth a little package folded in silk. "Why have I done naught but threaten till this time? If I went to him without proof, he would run me through with his sword as I were a mad dog. But is there another woman in England from whose head her lover could ravish a lock as long and black as this?"

He unfolded the silk, and let other silk unfold itself, a great and thick ring of raven hair which uncoiled its serpent length, and though he held it high, was long enough after surging from his hand to lie upon the floor.

"Merciful God!" she cried, and shuddering, hid her face.

"'Twas a bet, I own," he said; "I heard too much of the mad beauty and her disdain of men not to be fired by a desire to prove to her and others, that she was but a woman after all, and so was to be won. I took an oath that I would come back some day with a trophy--and this I cut when you knew not that I did it."

She clutched her throat again to keep from shrieking in her--impotent horror.

"Devil, craven, and loathsome--and he knows not what he is!" she gasped. "He is a mad thing who knows not that all his thoughts are of hell."

'Twas, in sooth, a strange and monstrous thing to see him so unwavering and bold, flinching before no ignominy, shrinking not to speak openly the thing before the mere accusation of which other men's blood would have boiled.

"When I bore it away with me," he said, "I lived wildly for a space, and in those days put it in a place of safety, and when I was sober again I had forgot where. Yesterday, by a strange chance, I came upon it. Think you it can be mistaken for any other woman's hair?"

At this she held up her hand.

"Wait," she said. "You will go to Osmonde, you will tell him this, you will--"

"I will tell him all the story of the rose garden and of the sun-dial, and the beauty who had wit enough to scorn a man in public that she might more safely hold tryst with him alone. She had great wit and cunning for a beauty of sixteen. 'Twould be well for her lord to have keen eyes when she is twenty."

He should have seen the warning in her eyes, for there was warning enough in their flaming depths.

"All that you can say I know," she said--"all that you can say! And I love him. There is no other man on earth. Were he a beggar, I would tramp the highroad by his side and go hungered with him. He is my lord, and I his mate--his mate!"

"That you will not be," he answered, made devilish by her words. "He is a high and noble gentleman, and wants no man's cast-off plaything for his wife."

Her breast leaped up and down in her panting as she pressed her hand upon

it; her breath came in sharp puffs through her nostrils.

"And once," she breathed--"and once--I loved thee--cur!"

He was mad with exultant villainy and passion, and he broke into a laugh.

"Loved me!" he said. "Thou! As thou lovedst me--and as thou lovest him--so will Moll Easy love any man--for a crown."

Her whip lay upon the table, she caught and whirled it in the air. She was blind with the surging of her blood, and saw not how she caught or held it, or what she did--only that she struck!

And 'twas his temple that the loaded weapon met, and 'twas wielded by a wrist whose sinews were of steel, and even as it struck he gasped, casting up his hands, and thereupon fell, and lay stretched at her feet!

But the awful tempest which swept over her had her so under its dominion that she was like a branch whirled on the wings of the storm. She scarce noted that he fell, or noting it, gave it not one thought as she dashed from one end of the apartment to the other with the fierce striding of a mad woman.

"Devil!" she cried, "and cur! and for thee I blasted all the years to come! To a beast so base I gave all that an empress' self could give--all life--all love--for ever. And he comes back--shameless--to barter like a cheating huckster, because his trade goes ill, and I--I could stock his counters once again."

She strode towards him, raving.

"Think you I do not know, woman's bully and poltroon, that you plot to sell yourself, because your day has come, and no woman will bid for such an outcast, saving one that you may threaten. Rise, vermin--rise, lest I kill thee!"

In her blind madness she lashed him once across the face again. And he stirred not--and something in the resistless feeling of the flesh beneath the whip, and in the quiet of his lying, caused her to pause and stand panting and staring at the thing which lay before her. For it was a Thing, and as she stood staring, with wild heaving breast, this she saw. 'Twas but a thing--a thing lying inert, its fair locks outspread, its eyes rolled upward till the blue was almost lost; a purple indentation on the right temple from which there oozed a tiny thread of blood.

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"There will be a way," she had said, and yet in her most mad despair, of this way she had never thought; though strange it had been, considering her lawless past, that she had not--never of this way--never!

Notwithstanding which, in one frenzied moment in which she had known naught but her delirium, her loaded whip had found it for her--the way!

And yet it being so found, and she stood staring, seeing what she had

done--seeing what had befallen--'twas as if the blow had been struck not at her own temple but at her heart--a great and heavy shock, which left her bloodless, and choked, and gasping.

"What! what!" she panted. "Nay! nay! nay!" and her eyes grew wide and wild.

She sank upon her knees, so shuddering that her teeth began to chatter. She pushed him and shook him by the shoulder.

"Stir!" she cried in a loud whisper. "Move thee! Why dost thou lie so? Stir!"

Yet he stirred not, but lay inert, only with his lips drawn back, showing his white teeth a little, as if her horrid agony made him begin to laugh. Shuddering, she drew slowly nearer, her eyes more awful than his own. Her hand crept shaking to his wrist and clutched it. There was naught astir--naught! It stole to his breast, and baring it, pressed close. That was still and moveless as his pulse; for life was ended, and a hundred mouldering years would not bring more of death.

"I have killed thee," she breathed. "I have killed thee--though I meant it not--even hell itself doth know. Thou art a dead man--and this is the worst of all!"

His hand fell heavily from hers, and she still knelt staring, such a look

coming into her face as throughout her life had never been there before--for 'twas the look of a creature who, being tortured, the worst at last being reached, begins to smile at Fate.

"I have killed him!" she said, in a low, awful voice; "and he lies here--and outside people walk, and know not. But he knows--and I--and as he lies methinks he smiles--knowing what he has done!"

She crouched even lower still, the closer to behold him, and indeed it seemed his still face sneered as if defying her now to rid herself of him! 'Twas as though he lay there mockingly content, saying, "Now that I lie here, 'tis for you--for you to move me."

She rose and stood up rigid, and all the muscles of her limbs were drawn as though she were a creature stretched upon a rack; for the horror of this which had befallen her seemed to fill the place about her, and leave her no air to breathe nor light to see.

"Now!" she cried, "if I would give way--and go mad, as I could but do, for there is naught else left--if I would but give way, that which is I--and has lived but a poor score of years--would be done with for all time. All whirls before me. 'Twas I who struck the blow--and I am a woman--and I could go raving--and cry out and call them in, and point to him, and tell them how 'twas done--all!--all!"

She choked, and clutched her bosom, holding its heaving down so fiercely

that her nails bruised it through her habit's cloth; for she felt that she had begun to rave already, and that the waves of such a tempest were arising as, if not quelled at their first swell, would sweep her from her feet and engulf her for ever.

"That--that!" she gasped--"nay--that I swear I will not do! There was always One who hated me--and doomed and hunted me from the hour I lay 'neath my dead mother's corpse, a new-born thing. I know not whom it was--or why--or how--but 'twas so! I was made evil, and cast helpless amid evil fates, and having done the things that were ordained, and there was no escape from, I was shown noble manhood and high honour, and taught to worship, as I worship now. An angel might so love and be made higher. And at the gate of heaven a devil grins at me and plucks me back, and taunts and mires me, and I fall--on this!"

She stretched forth her arms in a great gesture, wherein it seemed that surely she defied earth and heaven.

"No hope--no mercy--naught but doom and hell," she cried, "unless the thing that is tortured be the stronger. Now--unless Fate bray me small--the stronger I will be!"

She looked down at the thing before her. How its stone face sneered, and even in its sneering seemed to disregard her. She knelt by it again, her blood surging through her body, which had been cold, speaking as if she

would force her voice to pierce its deadened ear.

"Ay, mock!" she said, setting her teeth, "thinking that I am conquered--yet am I not! 'Twas an honest blow struck by a creature goaded past all thought! Ay, mock--and yet, but for one man's sake, would I call in those outside and stand before them, crying: 'Here is a villain whom I struck in madness--and he lies dead! I ask not mercy, but only justice.'"

She crouched still nearer, her breath and words coming hard and quick. 'Twas indeed as if she spoke to a living man who heard--as if she answered what he had said.

"There would be men in England who would give it me," she raved, whispering. "That would there, I swear! But there would be dullards and dastards who would not. He would give it--he! Ay, mock as thou wilt! But between his high honour and love and me thy carrion shall not come!"

By her great divan the dead man had fallen, and so near to it he lay that one arm was hidden by the draperies; and at this moment this she saw--before having seemed to see nothing but the death in his face. A thought came to her like a flame lit on a sudden, and springing high the instant the match struck the fuel it leaped from. It was a thought so daring and so strange that even she gasped once, being appalled, and her hands, stealing to her brow, clutched at the hair that grew there,

feeling it seem to rise and stand erect.

"Is it madness to so dare?" she said hoarsely, and for an instant, shuddering, hid her eyes, but then uncovered and showed them burning. "Nay! not as I will dare it," she said, "for it will make me steel. You fell well," she said to the stone-faced thing, "and as you lie there, seem to tell me what to do, in your own despite. You would not have so helped me had you known. Now 'tis 'twixt Fate and I--a human thing--who is but a hunted woman."

She put her strong hand forth and thrust him--he was already stiffening--backward from the shoulder, there being no shrinking on her face as she felt his flesh yield beneath her touch, for she had passed the barrier lying between that which is mere life and that which is pitiless hell, and could feel naught that was human. A poor wild beast at bay, pressed on all sides by dogs, by huntsmen, by resistless weapons, by Nature's pitiless self--glaring with bloodshot eyes, panting, with fangs bared in the savagery of its unfriended agony--might feel thus. 'Tis but a hunted beast; but 'tis alone, and faces so the terror and anguish of death.

The thing gazing with its set sneer, and moving but stiffly, she put forth another hand upon its side and thrust it farther backward until it lay stretched beneath the great broad seat, its glazed and open eyes seeming to stare upward blankly at the low roof of its strange prison; she thrust it farther backward still, and letting the draperies fall,

steadily and with care so rearranged them that all was safe and hid from sight.

"Until to-night," she said, "You will lie well there. And then--and then--"

She picked up the long silken lock of hair which lay like a serpent at her feet, and threw it into the fire, watching it burn, as all hair burns, with slow hissing, and she watched it till 'twas gone.

Then she stood with her hands pressed upon her eyeballs and her brow, her thoughts moving in great leaps. Although it reeled, the brain which had worked for her ever, worked clear and strong, setting before her what was impending, arguing her case, showing her where dangers would arise, how she must provide against them, what she must defend and set at defiance. The power of will with which she had been endowed at birth, and which had but grown stronger by its exercise, was indeed to be compared to some great engine whose lever 'tis not nature should be placed in human hands; but on that lever her hand rested now, and to herself she vowed she would control it, since only thus might she be saved. The torture she had undergone for months, the warring of the evil past with the noble present, of that which was sweet and passionately loving woman with that which was all but devil, had strung her to a pitch so intense and high that on the falling of this unnatural and unforeseen blow she was left scarce a human thing. Looking back, she saw herself a creature doomed from birth; and here in one moment seemed to stand a force ranged in mad

battle with the fate which had doomed her.

"'Twas ordained that the blow should fall so," she said, "and those who did it laugh--laugh at me."

'Twas but a moment, and her sharp breathing became even and regular as though at her command; her face composed itself, and she turned to the bell and rang it as with imperious haste.

When the lacquey entered, she was standing holding papers in her hand as if she had but just been consulting them.

"Follow Sir John Oxon," she commanded. "Tell him I have forgot an important thing and beg him to return at once. Lose no time. He has but just left me and can scarce be out of sight."

The fellow saw there was no time to lose. They all feared that imperial eye of hers and fled to obey its glances. Bowing, he turned, and hastened to do her bidding, fearing to admit that he had not seen the guest leave, because to do so would be to confess that he had been absent from his post, which was indeed the truth.

She knew he would come back shortly, and thus he did, entering somewhat breathed by his haste.

"My lady," he said, "I went quickly to the street, and indeed to the

corner of it, but Sir John was not within sight."

"Fool, you were not swift enough!" she said angrily. "Wait, you must go to his lodgings with a note. The matter is of importance."

She went to a table--'twas close to the divan, so close that if she had thrust forth her foot she could have touched what lay beneath it--and wrote hastily a few lines. They were to request That which was stiffening within three feet of her to return to her as quickly as possible that she might make inquiries of an important nature which she had forgotten at his departure.

"Take this to Sir John's lodgings," she said. "Let there be no loitering by the way. Deliver into his own hands, and bring back at once his answer."

Then she was left alone again, and being so left, paced the room slowly, her gaze upon the floor.

"That was well done," she said. "When he returns and has not found him, I will be angered, and send him again to wait."

She stayed her pacing, and passed her hand across her face.

"'Tis like a nightmare," she said--"as if one dreamed, and choked, and panted, and would scream aloud, but could not. I cannot! I must not!"

Would that I might shriek, and dash myself upon the floor, and beat my head upon it until I lay--as he does."

She stood a moment, breathing fast, her eyes widening, that part of her which was weak woman for the moment putting her in parlous danger, realising the which she pressed her sides with hands that were of steel.

"Wait! wait!" she said to herself. "This is going mad. This is loosening hold, and being beaten by that One who hates me and laughs to see what I have come to."

Naught but that unnatural engine of will could have held her within bounds and restrained the mounting female weakness that beset her; but this engine being stronger than all else, it beat her womanish and swooning terrors down.

"Through this one day I must live," she said, "and plan, and guard each moment that doth pass. My face must tell no tale, my voice must hint none. He will be still--God knows he will be still enough."

Upon the divan itself there had been lying a little dog; 'twas a King Charles' spaniel, a delicate pampered thing, which attached itself to her, and was not easily driven away. Once during the last hour the fierce, ill-hushed voices had disturbed it, and it had given vent to a fretted bark, but being a luxurious little beast, it had soon curled up among its cushions and gone to sleep again. But as its mistress walked

about muttering low words and oftentimes breathing sharp breaths, it became disturbed again. Perhaps through some instinct of which naught is known by human creatures, it felt the strange presence of a thing which roused it. It stirred, at first drowsily, and lifted its head and sniffed; then it stretched its limbs, and having done so, stood up, turning on its mistress a troubled eye, and this she saw and stopped to meet it. 'Twas a strange look she bestowed upon it, a startled and fearful one; her thought drew the blood up to her cheek, but backward again it flowed when the little beast lifted its nose and gave a low but woeful howl. Twice it did this, and then jumped down, and standing before the edge of the couch, stood there sniffing.

There was no mistake, some instinct of which it knew not the meaning had set it on, and it would not be thrust back. In all beasts this strange thing has been remarked--that they know That which ends them all, and so revolt against it that they cannot be at rest so long as it is near them, but must roar, or whinny, or howl until 'tis out of the reach of their scent. And so 'twas plain this little beast knew and was afraid and restless. He would not let it be, but roved about, sniffing and whining, and not daring to thrust his head beneath the falling draperies, but growing more and yet more excited and terrified, until at last he stopped, raised head in air, and gave vent to a longer, louder, and more dolorous howl, and albeit to one with so strange and noticeable a sound that her heart turned over in her breast as she stooped and caught him in her grasp, and shuddered as she stood upright, holding him to her side, her hand over his mouth. But he would not be hushed, and struggled to

get down as if indeed he would go mad unless he might get to the thing and rave at it.

"If I send thee from the room thou wilt come back, poor Frisk," she said.

"There will be no keeping thee away, and I have never ordered thee away before. Why couldst thou not keep still? Nay, 'twas not dog nature."

That it was not so was plain by his struggles and the yelps but poorly stifled by her grasp.

She put her hand about his little neck, turning, in sooth, very pale.

"Thou too, poor little beast," she said. "Thou too, who art so small a thing and never harmed me."

When the lacquey came back he wore an air more timorous than before.

"Your ladyship," he faltered, "Sir John had not yet reached his lodgings. His servant knew not when he might expect him."

"In an hour go again and wait," she commanded. "He must return ere long if he has not left town."

And having said this, pointed to a little silken heap which lay outstretched limp upon the floor. "'Tis poor Frisk, who has had some strange spasm, and fell, striking his head. He hath been ailing for

days, and howled loudly but an hour ago. Take him away, poor beast."