

CHAPTER XVIII--My Lady Dunstanwolde sits late alone and writes

That she must leave the Panelled Parlour at her usual hour, or attract attention by doing that to which her household was unaccustomed, she well knew, her manner of life being ever stately and ceremonious in its regularity. When she dined at home she and Anne partook of their repast together in the large dining-room, the table loaded with silver dishes and massive glittering glass, their powdered, gold-laced lacqueys in attendance, as though a score of guests had shared the meal with them. Since her lord's death there had been nights when her ladyship had sat late writing letters and reading documents pertaining to her estates, the management of which, though in a measure controlled by stewards and attorneys, was not left to them, as the business of most great ladies is generally left to others. All papers were examined by her, all leases and agreements clearly understood before she signed them, and if there were aught unsatisfactory, both stewards and lawyers were called to her presence to explain.

"Never did I--or any other man--meet with such a head upon a woman's shoulders," her attorney said. And the head steward of Dunstanwolde and Helversly learned to quake at the sight of her bold handwriting upon the outside of a letter.

"Such a lady!" he said--"such a lady! Lie to her if you can; palter if you know how; try upon her the smallest honest shrewd trick, and see how

it fares with you. Were it not that she is generous as she is piercing of eye, no man could serve her and make an honest living."

She went to her chamber and was attired again sumptuously for dinner. Before she descended she dismissed her woman for a space on some errand, and when she was alone, drawing near to her mirror, gazed steadfastly within it at her face. When she had read Osmonde's letter her cheeks had glowed; but when she had come back to earth, and as she had sat under her woman's hands at her toilette, bit by bit the crimson had died out as she had thought of what was behind her and of what lay before. The thing was so stiffly rigid by this time, and its eyes still stared so. Never had she needed to put red upon her cheeks before, Nature having stained them with such richness of hue; but as no lady of the day was unprovided with her crimson, there was a little pot among her toilette ornaments which contained all that any emergency might require. She opened this small receptacle and took from it the red she for the first time was in want of.

"I must not wear a pale face, God knows," she said, and rubbed the colour on her cheeks with boldness.

It would have seemed that she wore her finest crimson when she went forth full dressed from her apartment; little Nero grinned to see her, the lacqueys saying among themselves that his Grace's courier had surely brought good news, and that they might expect his master soon. At the dinner-table 'twas Anne who was pale and ate but little, she having put

no red upon her cheeks, and having no appetite for what was spread before her. She looked strangely as though she were withered and shrunken, and her face seemed even wrinkled. My lady had small leaning towards food, but she sent no food away untouched, forcing herself to eat, and letting not the talk flag--though it was indeed true that 'twas she herself who talked, Mistress Anne speaking rarely; but as it was always her way to be silent, and a listener rather than one who conversed, this was not greatly noticeable.

Her Ladyship of Dunstanwolde talked of her guests of the afternoon, and was charming and witty in her speech of them; she repeated the mots of the wits, and told some brilliant stories of certain modish ladies and gentlemen of fashion; she had things to say of statesmen and politics, and was sparkling indeed in speaking of the lovely languisher whose little wrist was too delicate and slender to support the loaded whip. While she talked, Mistress Anne's soft, dull eyes were fixed upon her with a sort of wonder which had some of the quality of bewilderment; but this was no new thing either, for to the one woman the other was ever something to marvel at.

"It is because you are so quiet a mouse, Anne," my lady said, with her dazzling smile, "that you seem never in the way; and yet I should miss you if I knew you were not within the house. When the duke takes me to Camylotte you must be with me even then. It is so great a house that in it I can find you a bower in which you can be happy even if you see us but little. 'Tis a heavenly place I am told, and of great splendour and

beauty. The park and flower-gardens are the envy of all England."

"You--will be very happy, sister," said Anne, "and--and like a queen."

"Yes," was her sister's answer--"yes." And 'twas spoken with a deep in-drawn breath.

After the repast was ended she went back to the Panelled Parlour.

"You may sit with me till bedtime if you desire, Anne," she said; "but 'twill be but dull for you, as I go to sit at work. I have some documents of import to examine and much writing to do. I shall sit up late." And upon this she turned to the lacquey holding open the door for her passing through. "If before half-past ten there comes a message from Sir John Oxon," she gave order, "it must be brought to me at once; but later I must not be disturbed--it will keep until morning."

Yet as she spoke there was before her as distinct a picture as ever of what lay waiting and gazing in the room to which she went.

Until twelve o'clock she sat at her table, a despatch box by her side, papers outspread before her. Within three feet of her was the divan, but she gave no glance to it, sitting writing, reading, and comparing documents. At twelve o'clock she rose and rang the bell.

"I shall be later than I thought," she said. "I need none of you who are

below stairs. Go you all to bed. Tell my woman that she also may lie down. I will ring when I come to my chamber and have need of her. There is yet no message from Sir John?"

"None, my lady," the man answered.

He went away with a relieved countenance, as she made no comment. He knew that his fellows as well as himself would be pleased enough to be released from duty for the night. They were a pampered lot, and had no fancy for late hours when there were no great entertainments being held which pleased them and gave them chances to receive vails.

Mistress Anne sat in a large chair, huddled into a small heap, and looking colourless and shrunken. As she heard bolts being shot and bars put up for the closing of the house, she knew that her own dismissal was at hand. Doors were shut below stairs, and when all was done the silence of night reigned as it does in all households when those who work have gone to rest. 'Twas a common thing enough, and yet this night there was one woman who felt the stillness so deep that it made her breathing seem a sound too loud.

"Go to bed, Anne," she said. "You have stayed up too long."

Anne arose from her chair and drew near to her.

"Sister," said she, as she had said before, "let me stay."

She was a poor weak creature, and so she looked with her pale insignificant face and dull eyes, a wisp of loose hair lying damp on her forehead. She seemed indeed too weak a thing to stand even for a moment in the way of what must be done this night, and 'twas almost irritating to be stopped by her.

"Nay," said my Lady Dunstanwolde, her beautiful brow knitting as she looked at her. "Go to your chamber, Anne, and to sleep. I must do my work, and finish to-night what I have begun."

"But--but--" Anne stammered, dominated again, and made afraid, as she ever was, by this strong nature, "in this work you must finish--is there not something I could do to--aid you--even in some small and poor way. Is there--naught?"

"Naught," answered Clorinda, her form drawn to its great full height, her lustrous eyes darkening. "What should there be that you could understand?"

"Not some small thing--not some poor thing?" Anne said, her fingers nervously twisting each other, so borne down was she by her awful timorousness, for awful it was indeed when she saw clouds gather on her sister's brow. "I have so loved you, sister--I have so loved you that my mind is quickened somehow at times, and I can understand more than would

be thought--when I hope to serve you. Once you said--once you said--"

She knew not then nor ever afterwards how it came to pass that in that moment she found herself swept into her sister's white arms and strained against her breast, wherein she felt the wild heart bounding; nor could she, not being given to subtle reasoning, have comprehended the almost fierce kiss on her cheek nor the hot drops that wet it.

"I said that I believed that if you saw me commit murder," Clorinda cried, "you would love me still, and be my friend and comforter."

"I would, I would!" cried Anne.

"And I believe your word, poor, faithful soul--I do believe it," my lady said, and kissed her hard again, but the next instant set her free and laughed. "But you will not be put to the test," she said, "for I have done none. And in two days' time my Gerald will be here, and I shall be safe--saved and happy for evermore--for evermore. There, leave me! I would be alone and end my work."

And she went back to her table and sat beside it, taking her pen to write, and Anne knew that she dare say no more, and turning, went slowly from the room, seeing for her last sight as she passed through the doorway, the erect and splendid figure at its task, the light from the candelabras shining upon the rubies round the snow-white neck and wreathed about the tower of raven hair like lines of crimson.