

CHAPTER XXIII--"In One who will do justice, and demands that it shall be done to each thing He has made, by each who bears His image"

'Twas in these days Sir Jeffry came to his end, it being in such way as had been often prophesied; and when this final hour came, there was but one who could give him comfort, and this was the daughter whose youth he had led with such careless evilness to harm.

If he had wondered at her when she had been my Lady Dunstanwolde, as her

Grace of Osmonde he regarded her with heavy awe. Never had she been able

to lead him to visit her at her house in town or at any other which was her home. "'Tis all too grand for me, your Grace," he would say; "I am a country yokel, and have hunted and drank, and lived too hard to look well among town gentlemen. I must be drunk at dinner, and when I am in liquor

I am no ornament to a duchess's drawing-room. But what a woman you have

grown," he would say, staring at her and shaking his head. "Each time I clap eyes on you 'tis to marvel at you, remembering what a baggage you were, and how you kept from slipping by the way. There was Jack Oxon, now," he added one day--"after you married Dunstanwolde, I heard a pretty tale of Jack--that he had made a wager among his friends in town--he was a braggart devil, Jack--that he would have you, though you were so scornful; and knowing him to be a liar, his fellows said that unless he could bring back a raven lock six feet long to show them, he had lost his

bet, for they would believe no other proof. And finely they scoffed at him when he came back saying that he had had one, but had hid it away for safety when he was drunk, and could not find it again. They so flouted and jeered at him that swords were drawn, and blood as well. But though he was a beauty and a crafty rake-hell fellow, you were too sharp for him. Had you not had so shrewd a wit and strong a will, you would not have been the greatest duchess in England, Clo, as well as the finest woman."

"Nay," she answered--"in those days--nay, let us not speak of them! I would blot them out--out."

As time went by, and the years spent in drink and debauchery began to tell even on the big, strong body which should have served any other man bravely long past his threescore and ten, Sir Jeffry drank harder and lived more wildly, sometimes being driven desperate by dulness, his coarse pleasures having lost their potency.

"Liquor is not as strong as it once was," he used to grumble, "and there are fewer things to stir a man to frolic. Lord, what roaring days and nights a man could have thirty years ago."

So in his efforts to emulate such nights and days, he plunged deeper and deeper into new orgies; and one night, after a heavy day's hunting, sitting at the head of his table with his old companions, he suddenly leaned forward, staring with starting eyes at an empty chair in a dark

corner. His face grew purple, and he gasped and gurgled.

"What is't, Jeoff?" old Eldershawe cried, touching his shoulder with a shaking hand. "What's the man staring at, as if he had gone mad?"

"Jack," cried Sir Jeoffry, his eyes still farther starting from their sockets. "Jack! what say you? I cannot hear."

The next instant he sprang up, shrieking, and thrusting with his hands as if warding something off.

"Keep back!" he yelled. "There is green mould on thee. Where hast thou been to grow mouldy? Keep back! Where hast thou been?"

His friends at table started up, staring at him and losing colour; he shrieked so loud and strangely, he clutched his hair with his hands, and fell into his chair, raving, clutching, and staring, or dashing his head down upon the table to hide his face, and then raising it as if he could not resist being drawn in his affright to gaze again. There was no soothing him. He shouted, and struggled with those who would have held him. 'Twas Jack Oxon who was there, he swore--Jack, who kept stealing slowly nearer to him, his face and his fine clothes damp and green, he beat at the air with mad hands, and at last fell upon the floor, and rolled, foaming at the mouth.

They contrived, after great strugglings, to bear him to his chamber, but

it took the united strength of all who would stay near him to keep him from making an end of himself. By the dawn of day his boon companions stood by him with their garments torn to tatters, their faces drenched with sweat, and their own eyes almost starting from their sockets; the doctor who had been sent for, coming in no hurry, but scowled and shook his head when he beheld him.

"He is a dead man," he said, "and the wonder is that this has not come before. He is sodden with drink and rotten with ill-living, besides being past all the strength of youth. He dies of the life he has lived."

'Twas little to be expected that his boon companions could desert their homes and pleasures and tend his horrors longer than a night. Such a sight as he presented did not inspire them to cheerful spirits.

"Lord," said Sir Chris Crowell, "to see him clutch his flesh and shriek and mouth, is enough to make a man live sober for his remaining days," and he shook his big shoulders with a shudder.

"Ugh!" he said, "God grant I may make a better end. He writhes as in hell-fire."

"There is but one on earth who will do aught for him," said Eldershawe.

"'Tis handsome Clo, who is a duchess; but she will come and tend him, I could swear. Even when she was a lawless devil of a child she had a way of standing by her friends and fearing naught."

So after taking counsel together they sent for her, and in as many hours as it took to drive from London, her coach stood before the door. By this time all the household was panic-stricken and in hopeless disorder, the women-servants scattered and shuddering in far corners of the house; such men as could get out of the way having found work to do afield or in the kennels, for none had nerve to stay where they could hear the madman's shrieks and howls.

Her Grace, entering the house, went with her woman straight to her chamber, and shortly emerged therefrom, stripped of her rich apparel, and clad in a gown of strong blue linen, her hair wound close, her white hands bare of any ornament, save the band of gold which was her wedding-ring. A serving-woman might have been clad so; but the plainness of her garb but made her height, and strength, so reveal themselves, that the mere sight of her woke somewhat that was like to awe in the eyes of the servants who beheld her as she passed.

She needed not to be led, but straightway followed the awful sounds, until she reached the chamber behind whose door they were shut. Upon the huge disordered bed, Sir Jeffry writhed, and tried to tear himself, his great sinewy and hairy body almost stark. Two of the stable men were striving to hold him.

The duchess went to his bedside and stood there, laying her strong white hand upon his shuddering shoulder.

"Father," she said, in a voice so clear, and with such a ring of steady command, as, the men said later, might have reached a dead man's ear.

"Father, 'tis Clo!"

Sir Jeffry writhed his head round and glared at her, with starting eyes and foaming mouth.

"Who says 'tis Clo?" he shouted. "'Tis a lie! She was ever a bigger devil than any other, though she was but a handsome wench. Jack himself could not manage her. She beat him, and would beat him now. 'Tis a lie!"

All through that day and night the power of her Grace's white arm was the thing which saved him from dashing out his brains. The two men could not have held him, and at his greatest frenzy they observed that now and then his bloodshot eye would glance aside at the beauteous face above him. The sound of the word "Clo" had struck upon his brain and wakened an echo.

She sent away the men to rest, calling for others in their places; but leave the bedside herself she would not. 'Twas a strange thing to see her strength and bravery, which could not be beaten down. When the doctor came again he found her there, and changed his surly and reluctant manner in the presence of a duchess, and one who in her close linen gown wore such a mien.

"You should not have left him," she said to him unbendingly, "even though I myself can see there is little help that can be given. Thought you his Grace and I would brook that he should die alone if we could not have reached him?"

Those words "his Grace and I" put a new face upon the matter, and all was done that lay within the man's skill; but most was he disturbed concerning the lady, who would not be sent to rest, and whose noble consort would be justly angered if she were allowed to injure her superb health.

"His Grace knew what I came to do and how I should do it," the duchess said, unbending still. "But for affairs of State which held him, he would have been here at my side."

She held her place throughout the second night, and that was worse than the first--the paroxysms growing more and more awful; for Jack was within a yard, and stretched out a green and mouldy hand, the finger-bones showing through the flesh, the while he smiled awfully.

At last one pealing scream rang out after another, until after making his shuddering body into an arc resting on heels and head, the madman fell exhausted, his flesh all quaking before the eye. Then the duchess waved the men who helped, away. She sat upon the bed's edge close--close to her father's body, putting her two firm hands on either of his shoulders, holding him so, and bent down, looking into his wild face, as if she

fixed upon his very soul all the power of her wondrous will.

"Father," she said, "look at my face. Thou canst if thou wilt. Look at my face. Then wilt thou see 'tis Clo--and she will stand by thee."

She kept her gaze upon his very pupils; and though 'twas at first as if his eyes strove to break away from her look, their effort was controlled by her steadfastness, and they wandered back at last, and her great orbs held them. He heaved a long breath, half a big, broken sob, and lay still, staring up at her.

"Ay," he said, "'tis Clo! 'tis Clo!"

The sweat began to roll from his forehead, and the tears down his cheeks. He broke forth, wailing like a child.

"Clo--Clo," he said, "I am in hell."

She put her hand on his breast, keeping will and eyes set on him.

"Nay," she answered; "thou art on earth, and in thine own bed, and I am here, and will not leave thee."

She made another sign to the men who stood and stared aghast in wonder at

her, but feeling in the very air about her the spell to which the madness



had given way.

"'Twas not mere human woman who sat there," they said afterwards in the stables among their fellows. "'Twas somewhat more. Had such a will been in an evil thing a man's hair would have risen on his skull at the seeing of it."

"Go now," she said to them, "and send women to set the place in order."

She had seen delirium and death enough in the doings of her deeds of mercy, to know that his strength had gone and death was coming. His bed and room were made orderly, and at last he lay in clean linen, with all made straight. Soon his eyes seemed to sink into his head and stare from hollows, and his skin grew grey, but ever he stared only at his daughter's face.

"Clo," he said at last, "stay by me! Clo, go not away!"

"I shall not go," she answered.

She drew a seat close to his bed and took his hand. It lay knotted and gnarled and swollen-veined upon her smooth palm, and with her other hand she stroked it. His breath came weak and quick, and fear grew in his eyes.

"What is it, Clo?" he said. "What is't?"

"'Tis weakness," replied she, soothing him. "Soon you will sleep."

"Ay," he said, with a breath like a sob. "'Tis over."

His big body seemed to collapse, he shrank so in the bed-clothes.

"What day o' the year is it?" he asked.

"The tenth of August," was her answer.

"Sixty-nine years from this day was I born," he said, "and now 'tis done."

"Nay," said she--"nay--God grant--"

"Ay," he said, "done. Would there were nine and sixty more. What a man I was at twenty. I want not to die, Clo. I want to live--to live--live, and be young," gulping, "with strong muscle and moist flesh. Sixty-nine years--and they are gone!"

He clung to her hand, and stared at her with awful eyes. Through all his life he had been but a great, strong, human carcass; and he was now but the same carcass worn out, and at death's door. Of not one human thing but of himself had he ever thought, not one creature but himself had he ever loved--and now he lay at the end, harking back only to the wicked

years gone by.

"None can bring them back," he shuddered. "Not even thou, Clo, who art so strong. None--none! Canst pray, Clo?" with the gasp of a craven.

"Not as chaplains do," she answered. "I believe not in a God who clamours but for praise."

"What dost believe in, then?"

"In One who will do justice, and demands that it shall be done to each thing He has made, by each who bears His image--ay, and mercy too--but justice always, for justice is mercy's highest self."

Who knows the mysteries of the human soul--who knows the workings of the human brain? The God who is just alone. In this man's mind, which was so near a simple beast's in all its movings, some remote, unborn consciousness was surely reached and vaguely set astir by the clear words thus spoken.

"Clo, Clo!" he cried, "Clo, Clo!" in terror, clutching her the closer, "what dost thou mean? In all my nine and sixty years--" and rolled his head in agony.

In all his nine and sixty years he had shown justice to no man, mercy to

no woman, since he had thought of none but Jeffrey Wildairs; and this truth somehow dimly reached his long-dulled brain and wakened there.

"Down on thy knees, Clo!" he gasped--"down on thy knees!"

It was so horrible, the look struggling in his dying face, that she went down upon her knees that moment, and so knelt, folding his shaking hands within her own against her breast.

"Thou who didst make him as he was born into Thy world," she said, "deal with that to which Thou didst give life--and death. Show him in this hour, which Thou mad'st also, that Thou art not Man who would have vengeance, but that justice which is God."

"Then--then," he gasped--"then will He damn me!"

"He will weigh thee," she said; "and that which His own hand created will He separate from that which was thine own wilful wrong--and this, sure, He will teach thee how to expiate."

"Clo," he cried again--"thy mother--she was but a girl, and died alone--I did no justice to her!--Daphne! Daphne!" And he shook beneath the bed-clothes, shuddering to his feet, his face growing more grey and pinched.

"She loved thee once," Clorinda said. "She was a gentle soul, and would not forget. She will show thee mercy."

"Birth she went through," he muttered, "and death--alone. Birth and death! Daphne, my girl--" And his voice trailed off to nothingness, and he lay staring at space, and panting.

The duchess sat by him and held his hand. She moved not, though at last he seemed to fall asleep. Two hours later he began to stir. He turned his head slowly upon his pillows until his gaze rested upon her, as she sat fronting him. 'Twas as though he had awakened to look at her.

"Clo!" he cried, and though his voice was but a whisper, there was both wonder and wild question in it--"Clo!"

But she moved not, her great eyes meeting his with steady gaze; and even as they so looked at each other his body stretched itself, his lids fell--and he was a dead man.