

CHAPTER XXIV--The doves sate upon the window-ledge and lowly cooed and cooed

When they had had ten years of happiness, Anne died. 'Twas of no violent illness, it seemed but that through these years of joy she had been gradually losing life. She had grown thinner and whiter, and her soft eyes bigger and more prayerful. 'Twas in the summer, and they were at Camylott, when one sweet day she came from the flower-garden with her hands full of roses, and sitting down by her sister in her morning-room, swooned away, scattering her blossoms on her lap and at her feet.

When she came back to consciousness she looked up at the duchess with a strange, far look, as if her soul had wandered back from some great distance.

"Let me be borne to bed, sister," she said. "I would lie still. I shall not get up again."

The look in her face was so unearthly and a thing so full of mystery, that her Grace's heart stood still, for in some strange way she knew the end had come.

They bore her to her tower and laid her in her bed, when she looked once round the room and then at her sister.

"'Tis a fair, peaceful room," she said. "And the prayers I have prayed in it have been answered. To-day I saw my mother, and she told me so."

"Anne! Anne!" cried her Grace, leaning over her and gazing fearfully into her face; for though her words sounded like delirium, her look had no wildness in it. And yet--"Anne, Anne! you wander, love," the duchess cried.

Anne smiled a strange, sweet smile. "Perchance I do," she said. "I know not truly, but I am very happy. She said that all was over, and that I had not done wrong. She had a fair, young face, with eyes that seemed to have looked always at the stars of heaven. She said I had done no wrong."

The duchess's face laid itself down upon the pillow, a river of clear tears running down her cheeks.

"Wrong!" she said--"you! dear one--woman of Christ's heart, if ever lived one. You were so weak and I so strong, and yet as I look back it seems that all of good that made me worthy to be wife and mother I learned from your simplicity."

Through the tower window and the ivy closing round it, the blueness of the summer sky was heavenly fair; soft, and light white clouds floated across the clearness of its sapphire. On this Anne's eyes were fixed with an uplifted tenderness until she broke her silence.

"Soon I shall be away," she said. "Soon all will be left behind. And I would tell you that my prayers were answered--and so, sure, yours will be."

No man could tell what made the duchess then fall on her knees, but she herself knew. 'Twas that she saw in the exalted dying face that turned to hers concealing nothing more.

"Anne! Anne!" she cried. "Sister Anne! Mother Anne of my children! You have known--you have known all the years and kept it hid!"

She dropped her queenly head and shielded the whiteness of her face in the coverlid's folds.

"Ay, sister," Anne said, coming a little back to earth, "and from the first. I found a letter near the sun-dial--I guessed--I loved you--and could do naught else but guard you. Many a day have I watched within the rose-garden--many a day--and night--God pardon me--and night. When I knew a letter was hid, 'twas my wont to linger near, knowing that my presence would keep others away. And when you approached--or he--I slipped aside and waited beyond the rose hedge--that if I heard a step, I might make some sound of warning. Sister, I was your sentinel, and being so, knelt while on my guard, and prayed."

"My sentinel!" Clorinda cried. "And knowing all, you so guarded me night

and day, and prayed God's pity on my poor madness and girl's frenzy!" And she gazed at her in amaze, and with humblest, burning tears.

"For my own poor self as well as for you, sister, did I pray God's pity as I knelt," said Anne. "For long I knew it not--being so ignorant--but alas! I loved him too!--I loved him too! I have loved no man other all my days. He was unworthy any woman's love--and I was too lowly for him to cast a glance on; but I was a woman, and God made us so."

Clorinda clutched her pallid hand.

"Dear God," she cried, "you loved him!"

Anne moved upon her pillow, drawing weakly, slowly near until her white lips were close upon her sister's ear.

"The night," she panted--"the night you bore him--in your arms--"

Then did the other woman give a shuddering start and lift her head, staring with a frozen face.

"What! what!" she cried.

"Down the dark stairway," the panting voice went on, "to the far cellar--I kept watch again."

"You kept watch--you?" the duchess gasped.

"Upon the stair which led to the servants' place--that I might stop them if--if aught disturbed them, and they oped their doors--that I might send them back, telling them--it was I."

Then stooped the duchess nearer to her, her hands clutching the coverlid, her eyes widening.

"Anne, Anne," she cried, "you knew the awful thing that I would hide! That too? You knew that he was there!"

Anne lay upon her pillow, her own eyes gazing out through the ivy-hung window of her tower at the blue sky and the fair, fleecy clouds. A flock of snow-white doves were flying back and forth across it, and one sate upon the window's deep ledge and cooed. All was warm and perfumed with summer's sweetness. There seemed naught between her and the uplifting blueness, and naught of the earth was near but the dove's deep-throated cooing and the laughter of her Grace's children floating upward from the garden of flowers below.

"I lie upon the brink," she said--"upon the brink, sister, and methinks my soul is too near to God's pure justice to fear as human things fear, and judge as earth does. She said I did no wrong. Yes, I knew."

"And knowing," her sister cried, "you came to me that afternoon!"

"To stand by that which lay hidden, that I might keep the rest away.

Being a poor creature and timorous and weak--"

"Weak! weak!" the duchess cried, amid a greater flood of streaming tears--"ay, I have dared to call you so, who have the heart of a great lioness. Oh, sweet Anne--weak!"

"'Twas love," Anne whispered. "Your love was strong, and so was mine. That other love was not for me. I knew that my long woman's life would pass without it--for woman's life is long, alas! if love comes not. But you were love's self, and I worshipped you and it; and to myself I said--praying forgiveness on my knees--that one woman should know love if I did not. And being so poor and imperfect a thing, what mattered if I gave my soul for you--and love, which is so great, and rules the world. Look at the doves, sister, look at them, flying past the heavenly blueness--and she said I did no wrong."

Her hand was wet with tears fallen upon it, as her duchess sister knelt, and held and kissed it, sobbing.

"You knew, poor love, you knew!" she cried.

"Ay, all of it I knew," Anne said--"his torture of you and the madness of your horror. And when he forced himself within the Panelled Parlour that day of fate, I knew he came to strike some deadly blow; and in such

anguish I waited in my chamber for the end, that when it came not, I crept down, praying that somehow I might come between--and I went in the room!"

"And there--what saw you?" quoth the duchess, shuddering. "Somewhat you must have seen, or you could not have known."

"Ay," said Anne, "and heard!" and her chest heaved.

"Heard!" cried Clorinda. "Great God of mercy!"

"The room was empty, and I stood alone. It was so still I was afraid; it seemed so like the silence of the grave; and then there came a sound--a long and shuddering breath--but one--and then--"

The memory brought itself too keenly back, and she fell a-shivering.

"I heard a slipping sound, and a dead hand fell on the floor-lying outstretched, its palm turned upwards, showing beneath the valance of the couch."

She threw her frail arms round her sister's neck, and as Clorinda clasped her own, breathing gaspingly, they swayed together.

"What did you then?" the duchess cried, in a wild whisper.

"I prayed God keep me sane--and knelt--and looked below. I thrust it back--the dead hand, saying aloud, 'Swoon you must not, swoon you must not, swoon you shall not--God help! God help!'--and I saw!--the purple mark--his eyes upturned--his fair curls spread; and I lost strength and fell upon my side, and for a minute lay there--knowing that shudder of breath had been the very last expelling of his being, and his hand had fallen by its own weight."

"O God! O God! O God!" Clorinda cried, and over and over said the word, and over again.

"How was't--how was't?" Anne shuddered, clinging to her. "How was't 'twas done? I have so suffered, being weak--I have so prayed! God will have mercy--but it has done me to death, this knowledge, and before I die, I pray you tell me, that I may speak truly at God's throne."

"O God! O God! O God!" Clorinda groaned--"O God!" and having cried so, looking up, was blanched as a thing struck with death, her eyes like a great stag's that stands at bay.

"Stay, stay!" she cried, with a sudden shock of horror, for a new thought had come to her which, strangely, she had not had before. "You thought I murdered him?"

Convulsive sobs heaved Anne's poor chest, tears sweeping her hollow

cheeks, her thin, soft hands clinging piteously to her sister's.

"Through all these years I have known nothing," she wept--"sister, I have known nothing but that I found him hidden there, a dead man, whom you so hated and so feared."

Her hands resting upon the bed's edge, Clorinda held her body upright, such passion of wonder, love, and pitying adoring awe in her large eyes as was a thing like to worship.

"You thought I murdered him, and loved me still," she said. "You thought I murdered him, and still you shielded me, and gave me chance to live, and to repent, and know love's highest sweetness. You thought I murdered him, and yet your soul had mercy. Now do I believe in God, for only a God could make a heart so noble."

"And you--did not--" cried out Anne, and raised upon her elbow, her breast panting, but her eyes growing wide with light as from stars from heaven. "Oh, sister love--thanks be to Christ who died!"

The duchess rose, and stood up tall and great, her arms out-thrown.

"I think 'twas God Himself who did it," she said, "though 'twas I who struck the blow. He drove me mad and blind, he tortured me, and thrust to my heart's core. He taunted me with that vile thing Nature will not

let women bear, and did it in my Gerald's name, calling on him. And then I struck with my whip, knowing nothing, not seeing, only striking, like a goaded dying thing. He fell--he fell and lay there--and all was done!"

"But not with murderous thought--only through frenzy and a cruel chance--a

cruel, cruel chance. And of your own will blood is not upon your hand," Anne panted, and sank back upon her pillow.

"With deepest oaths I swear," Clorinda said, and she spoke through her clenched teeth, "if I had not loved, if Gerald had not been my soul's life and I his, I would have stood upright and laughed in his face at the devil's threats. Should I have feared? You know me. Was there a thing on earth or in heaven or hell I feared until love rent me. 'Twould but have fired my blood, and made me mad with fury that dares all. 'Spread it abroad!' I would have cried to him. 'Tell it to all the world, craven and outcast, whose vileness all men know, and see how I shall bear myself, and how I shall drive through the town with head erect. As I bore myself when I set the rose crown on my head, so shall I bear myself then. And you shall see what comes!' This would I have said, and held to it, and gloried. But I knew love, and there was an anguish that I could not endure--that my Gerald should look at me with changed eyes, feeling that somewhat of his rightful meed was gone. And I was all distraught and conquered. Of ending his base life I never thought, never at my wildest, though I had thought to end my own; but when Fate struck the blow for me, then I swore that carrion should not taint my whole life

through. It should not--should not--for 'twas Fate's self had doomed me to my ruin. And there it lay until the night; for this I planned, that being of such great strength for a woman, I could bear his body in my arms to the farthest of that labyrinth of cellars I had commanded to be cut off from the rest and closed; and so I did when all were sleeping--but you, poor Anne--but you! And there I laid him, and there he lies to-day--an evil thing turned to a handful of dust."

"It was not murder," whispered Anne--"no, it was not." She lifted to her sister's gaze a quivering lip. "And yet once I had loved him--years I had loved him," she said, whispering still. "And in a woman there is ever somewhat that the mother creature feels"--the hand which held her sister's shook as with an ague, and her poor lip quivered--"Sister, I--saw him again!"

The duchess drew closer as she gasped, "Again!"

"I could not rest," the poor voice said. "He had been so base, he was so beautiful, and so unworthy love--and he was dead,--none knowing, untouched by any hand that even pitied him that he was so base a thing, for that indeed is piteous when death comes and none can be repentant. And he lay so hard, so hard upon the stones."

Her teeth were chattering, and with a breath drawn like a wild sob of terror, the duchess threw her arm about her and drew her nearer.

"Sweet Anne," she shuddered--"sweet Anne--come back--you wander!"

"Nay, 'tis not wandering," Anne said. "'Tis true, sister. There is no night these years gone by I have not remembered it again--and seen. In the night after that you bore him there--I prayed until the mid-hours, when all were sleeping fast--and then I stole down--in my bare feet, that none could hear me--and at last I found my way in the black dark--feeling the walls until I reached that farthest door in the stone--and then I lighted my taper and oped it."

"Anne!" cried the duchess--"Anne, look through the tower window at the blueness of the sky--at the blueness, Anne!" But drops of cold water had started out and stood upon her brow.

"He lay there in his grave--it was a little black place with its stone walls--his fair locks were tumbled," Anne went on, whispering. "The spot was black upon his brow--and methought he had stopped mocking, and surely looked upon some great and awful thing which asked of him a question. I knelt, and laid his curls straight, and his hands, and tried to shut his eyes, but close they would not, but stared at that which questioned. And having loved him so, I kissed his poor cheek as his mother might have done, that he might not stand outside, having carried not one tender human thought with him. And, oh, I prayed, sister--I prayed for his poor soul with all my own. 'If there is one noble or gentle thing he has ever done through all his life,' I prayed, 'Jesus remember it--Christ do not

forget.' We who are human do so few things that are noble--oh, surely one must count."

The duchess's head lay near her sister's breast, and she had fallen a-sobbing--a-sobbing and weeping like a young broken child.

"Oh, brave and noble, pitiful, strong, fair soul!" she cried. "As Christ loved you have loved, and He would hear your praying. Since you so pleaded, He would find one thing to hang His mercy on."

She lifted her fair, tear-streaming face, clasping her hands as one praying.

"And I--and I," she cried--"have I not built a temple on his grave? Have I not tried to live a fair life, and be as Christ bade me? Have I not loved, and pitied, and succoured those in pain? Have I not filled a great man's days with bliss, and love, and wifely worship? Have I not given him noble children, bred in high lovingness, and taught to love all things God made, even the very beasts that perish, since they, too, suffer as all do? Have I left aught undone? Oh, sister, I have so prayed that I left naught. Even though I could not believe that there was One who, ruling all, could yet be pitiless as He is to some, I have prayed That--which sure it seems must be, though we comprehend it not--to teach me faith in something greater than my poor self, and not of earth. Say this to Christ's self when you are face to face--say this to Him, I pray you! Anne, Anne, look not so strangely through the window at the

blueness of the sky, sweet soul, but look at me."

For Anne lay upon her pillow so smiling that 'twas a strange thing to behold. It seemed as she were smiling at the whiteness of the doves against the blue. A moment her sister stood up watching her, and then she stirred, meaning to go to call one of the servants waiting outside; but though she moved not her gaze from the tower window, Mistress Anne faintly spoke.

"Nay--stay," she breathed. "I go--softly--stay."

Clorinda fell upon her knees again and bent her lips close to her ear. This was death, and yet she feared it not--this was the passing of a soul, and while it went it seemed so fair and loving a thing that she could ask it her last question--her greatest--knowing it was so near to God that its answer must be rest.

"Anne, Anne," she whispered, "must he know--my Gerald? Must I--must I tell him all? If so I must, I will--upon my knees."

The doves came flying downward from the blue, and lighted on the window stone and cooed--Anne's answer was as low as her soft breath and her still eyes were filled with joy at that she saw but which another could not.

"Nay," she breathed. "Tell him not. What need? Wait, and let God tell

him--who understands."

Then did her soft breath stop, and she lay still, her eyes yet open and smiling at the blossoms, and the doves who sate upon the window-ledge and lowly cooed and cooed.

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'Twas her duchess sister who clad her for her last sleeping, and made her chamber fair--the hand of no other touched her; and while 'twas done the tower chamber was full of the golden sunshine, and the doves ceased not to flutter about the window, and coo as if they spoke lovingly to each other of what lay within the room.

Then the children came to look, their arms full of blossoms and flowering sprays. They had been told only fair things of death, and knowing but these fair things, thought of it but as the opening of a golden door. They entered softly, as entering the chamber of a queen, and moving tenderly, with low and gentle speech, spread all their flowers about the bed--laying them round her head, on her breast, and in her hands, and strewing them thick everywhere.

"She lies in a bower and smiles at us," one said. "She hath grown beautiful like you, mother, and her face seems like a white star in the morning."

"She loves us as she ever did," the fair child Daphne said; "she will never cease to love us, and will be our angel. Now have we an angel of our own."

When the duke returned, who had been absent since the day before, the duchess led him to the tower chamber, and they stood together hand in hand and gazed at her peace.

"Gerald," the duchess said, in her tender voice, "she smiles, does not she?"

"Yes," was Osmonde's answer--"yes, love, as if at God, who has smiled at herself--faithful, tender woman heart!"

The hand which he held in his clasp clung closer. The other crept to his shoulder and lay there tremblingly.

"How faithful and how tender, my Gerald," Clorinda said, "I only know. She is my saint--sweet Anne, whom I dared treat so lightly in my poor wayward days. Gerald, she knows all my sins, and to-day she has carried them in her pure hands to God and asked His mercy on them. She had none of her own."

"And so having done, dear heart, she lies amid her flowers, and smiles," he said, and he drew her white hand to press it against his breast.

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While her body slept beneath soft turf and flowers, and that which was her self was given in God's heaven, all joys for which her earthly being had yearned, even when unknowing how to name its longing, each year that passed made more complete and splendid the lives of those she so had loved. Never, 'twas said, had woman done such deeds of gentleness and shown so sweet and generous a wisdom as the great duchess. None who were

weak were in danger if she used her strength to aid them; no man or woman was a lost thing whom she tried to save: such tasks she set herself as no lady had ever given herself before; but 'twas not her way to fail--her will being so powerful, her brain so clear, her heart so purely noble.

Pauper and prince, noble and hind honoured her and her lord alike, and all felt wonder at their happiness. It seemed that they had learned life's meaning and the honouring of love, and this they taught to their children, to the enriching of a long and noble line. In the ripeness of years they passed from earth in as beauteous peace as the sun sets, and upon a tablet above the resting-place of their ancestors there are inscribed lines like these:--

"Here sleeps by her husband the purest and noblest lady God e'er loved, yet the high and gentle deeds of her chaste sweet life sleep not, but live and grow, and so will do so long as earth is earth."