

CHAPTER XVIII

A Night in which my Lord Duke Did Not Sleep

As they rolled over the roads on their way homeward, in the darkness of their coach, my Lord Dunstanwolde spoke of his happiness and told its story. There was no approach to an old lover's exultant folly in his talk; his voice was full of noble feeling, and in his manner there was somewhat like to awe of the great joy which had befallen him. To him who listened to the telling 'twas a strange relation indeed, since each incident seemed to reveal to him a blindness in himself. Why had he not read the significance of a score of things which he could now recall? A score of things?--a hundred! Because he had been in his early prime, and full of the visions and passions of youth, he had not for one moment dreamed that a man who was so far his senior could be a man still, his heart living enough to yearn and ache, his eyes clear to see the radiance others saw, and appraise it as adoringly. 'Twas the common fault of youth to think to lead the world and to sweep aside from its path all less warm-blooded, strong-limbed creatures, feeling their day was done for them, and that for them there was naught left but to wait quietly for the end. There was an ignobleness in it--a self-absorption which was almost dishonour. And in this way he had erred as far as any stripling with blooming cheeks and girlish love-locks who thought that nine and twenty struck the knell of love and life. 'Twas thoughts like these that were passing through his mind as they were driven through

the darkness--at least they were the thoughts upon the surface of his mind, while below them surged a torrent into whose darkness he dared not look. He was a man, and he had lost her--lost her! She had become a part of his being--and she had been torn from his side. "Let me but look into your eyes," he had said, and he had looked and read her answering soul--too late!

"I have passed through dark days, Gerald," my lord was saying. "How should I have dared to hope that she would give herself to me? I had been mad to hope it. And yet a man in my case must plead, whether he despairs or not. I think 'twas her gentleness to Mistress Anne which has sustained me. That poor gentlewoman and I have the happiness to know her heart as others do not. Thank God, 'tis so! When to-night I said to her sadly, 'Madam, my youth is long past,' she stopped me with a strange and tender little cry. She put her hand upon my shoulder. Ah, its soft touch, its white, kind caress! 'Youth is not all,' she said.

'I have known younger men who could not bring a woman truth and honourable love. 'Tis not I who give, 'tis not I,' and the full sweet red of her mouth quivered. I--have not yet dared to touch it, Gerald." And his voice was sad as well as reverent. "Youth would have been more bold."

In his dark corner of the coach his Grace checked breath to control a start. In the past he had had visions such as all men have--and all was lost! And to-morrow his kinsman would have gained courage to look his new bliss in the face--the autumn of his days would be warmed by a late

glow of the sun, but that long summer which yet lay before himself would know no flame of gold. The years he had spent in training his whole being to outward self-control at least did service to him now, and aided him to calm, affectionate speech.

"You will make her life a happy one, my Lord," he said, "and you will be a joyous man indeed."

Together they conversed on this one subject until their journey was over. When they had passed through the hall and stood at length in the light of the apartment in which it was their custom to sit, Osmonde beheld in my lord's face the freshness and glow he had marked on his arrival, increased tenfold, and now he well understood. In truth, the renewal of his life was a moving thing to see. He stood by the mantel, his arm resting upon it, his forehead in his hand, for a little space in silence and as if lost in thought.

"She is a goddess," he said, "and because she is so, can be humble. Had you but seen her, Gerald, when she spoke. 'Tis not I who give,' she saith. 'You are a great Earl, I am a poor beauty--a shrew--a hoyden. I give naught but this!' and flung her fair arms apart with a great lovely gesture and stood before me stately, her beauty glowing like the sun."

He drew a deep sigh of tenderness and looked up with a faint start.

"'Tis not fair I should fatigue you with my ecstasy," he said. "You

look pale, Gerald. You are generous to listen with such patience."

"I need no patience," answered my lord Duke with noble warmth, "to aid me to listen to the kinsman I have loved from childhood when he speaks of his happiness with the fairest woman in the world. Having seen her to-night, I do not wonder she is called so by her worshippers."

"The fairest and the noblest," said my Lord. "Great Heaven, how often have I sate alone in this very room calling myself a madman in my despair! And now 'tis past! Sure it cannot be true?"

"'Tis true, my dear Lord," said Osmonde, "for I beheld it."

"Had you been in my place," his lordship said with his grave, kindly look, "you need not have wondered at your fortune. If you had lived in Warwickshire instead of winning laurels in campaign you might have been my rival if you would--and I a hopeless man--and she a Duchess. But you two never met."

My lord Duke held out his hand and grasped his kinsman's with friendly sympathy.

"Until to-night we never met," he said. "'Twas Fate ordained it so--and I would not be your rival, for we have loved each other too long. I must wait to find another lady, and she will be Countess of Dunstanwolde."

He bore himself composedly until they had exchanged the final courtesies and parted for the night, and having mounted the stairs had passed through the long gallery which led him to his apartments. When he opened the door it seemed to his fancy that the wax tapers burned but dimly amid the shadows of the great room, and that the pictured faces hanging on the walls looked white and gazed as if aghast.

The veins were swollen in his temples and throbbed hard, his blood coursed hot and cold alternately, there were drops starting out upon his brow. He had not known his passions were so tempestuous and that he could be prey to such pangs of anguish and of rage. Hitherto he had held himself in check, but now 'twas as if he had lost his hold on the reins which controlled galloping steeds. The blood of men who had been splendid savages centuries ago ran wild within him. His life for thirty years had been noble and just and calm. Being endowed with all gifts by Nature and his path made broad by Fortune, he had dealt in high honour with all bestowed upon him. But now for this night he knew he was a different man, and that his hour had come.

He stood in the centre of the chamber and tossed up his hands, laughing a mad, low, harsh laugh.

"Not as Hugh de Mertoun came back," he said. "Good God! no, no!"

The rage of him, body and soul, made him sick and suffocated him.

"Could a man go mad in such case?" he cried. "I am not sane! I cannot reason! I would not have believed it."

His arteries so throbbled that he tore open the lace at his throat and flung back his head. "I cannot reason!" he said. "I know now how men kill. And yet he is as sweet a soul as Heaven ever made." He paced the great length of the chamber to and fro.

"'Tis not Nature," he said. "It cannot be borne--he to hold her to his breast, and I--I to stand aside. Her eyes--her lovely, melting, woman's eyes!"

Men have been mad before for less of the same torment, and he whose nature was fire, and whose imagination had the power to torture him by picturing all he had lost and all another man had won, was only saved because he knew his frenzy.

"To this place itself she will be brought," he thought. "In these rooms she will move, wife and queen and mistress. He will so worship her that she cannot but melt to him. At the mere thought of it my brain reels."

He knew that his thoughts were half delirium, his words half raving, yet he could not control them, and thanked chance that his apartment was near none other which was occupied, and that he could stride about and stamp his foot upon the floor, and yet no sound be heard beyond the

massive walls and doors. Outside such walls, in the face of the world, he must utter no word, show no sign by any quiver of a muscle; and 'twas the realisation of the silence he must keep, the pignard stabs he must endure without movement, which at this hour drove him to madness.

"This is but the beginning," he groaned. "Since I am his kinsman and we have been friends, I am bound as a man upon the rack is bound while he is torn limb from limb. I must see it all--there will be no escape. At their marriage I must attend them. God save me--taking my fit place as the chief of my house at the nuptials of a well beloved kinsman, I must share in the rejoicings, and be taunted by his rapture and her eyes. Nay, nay, she cannot gaze at him as she would have gazed at me--she cannot! Yet how shall I endure!"

For hours he walked to and fro, the mere sense of restless movement being an aid to his mood. Sometimes again he flung himself into a seat and sat with hidden eyes. But he could not shut out the pictures his fevered fancy painted for him. A man of strong imagination, and who is possessed by a growing passion, cannot fail to depict to himself, and live in, vivid dreams of that future of his hopes which is his chiefest joy. So he had dreamed, sometimes almost with the wild fervour of a boy, smiling while he did it, at his own pleasure in the mere detail his fancy presented to him. In these day-dreams his wealth, the beauty and dignity of his estates, the brilliant social atmosphere his rank assured him, had gained a value he had never recognised before. He

remembered now, with torturing distinctness, the happy day when it had first entered his mind, that those things which had been his daily surroundings from his childhood would all be new pleasures to her, all in strong contrast to the atmosphere of her past years. His heart actually leapt at the thought of the smilingness of fortune which had lavished upon him so much, that 'twould be rapture to him to lay at her feet. He had remembered tenderly the stately beauty of his beloved Camylott, the bosky dells at Marlowell Dane, the quaint dignity of the Elizabethan manor at Paulyn Dorlocke, the soft hills near Mertounhurst, where myriads of harebells grew and swayed in the summer breeze as it swept them; and the clear lake in the park at Roxholm, where the deer came to drink, and as a boy he had lain in his boat and rocked among the lily-pads in the early morning, when the great white water-flowers spread their wax cups broad and seemed to hold the gold of the sun. His life had been so full of beauty and fair things; wheresoever his lot had fallen at any time he had had fair days, fair nights, and earth's loveliness to behold. And all he had loved and joyed in, he had known she would love and joy in, too. What a chatelaine she would make, he had thought; how the simple rustic folk would worship her! What a fit setting for her beauty would seem the grand saloons of Osmonde House! What a fit and queen-like wearer she would be for the marvellous jewels which had crowned fair heads and clasped fair throats and arms for centuries! There were diamonds all England had heard rumour of, and he had even lost himself in a lover's fancy of an hour when he himself would clasp a certain dazzling collar round the column of her throat, and never yet had he given himself to the fancy but in his vision he

had laid his lips on the warm whiteness when 'twas done, and lost himself in a passionate kiss--and she had turned and smiled a heavenly answering bridal smile.

This he remembered now, clinching his hands until he drove the nails into his palms.

"I have been madder than I thought," he said. "Yes, 'twas madness--but 'twas Nature, too! Good God!" his forehead dropping in his hand and he panting. "I feel as if she had been a year my wife, and another man had torn her from my breast. And yet she has not been mine an hour--nor ever will be--and she is Dunstanwolde's, who, while I wake in torment, dreams in bliss, as is his honest, heavenly right." Even to the torment he had no claim, but in being torn by it seemed but robbing another man. What a night of impotent rage it was, of unreasoning, hopeless hatred of himself, of his fate, and even of the man who was his rival, though at his worst he reviled his frenzy, which could be so base as to rend unjustly a being without blame.

'Twas not himself who hated, but the madness in his blood which for this space ran riot.

At dawn, when the first glimmer of light began to pale the skies, he found himself sitting by the wide-thrown casement still in the attire he had worn the night before. For the first time since he had been born his splendid normal strength had failed him and he was heavy with

unnatural fatigue. He sate looking out until the pale tint had deepened to primrose and the primrose into sunrise gold; birds wakened in the trees' broad branches and twittered and flew forth; the sward and flowers were drenched with summer dews, and as the sun changed the drops to diamonds he gazed upon the lovely peace and breathed in the fresh fragrance of the early morn with a deep sigh, knowing his frenzy past but feeling that it had left him a changed man.

"Yes," he said, "I have been given too beauteous and smooth a life. Till now Fate has denied me nothing, and I have gone on my way unknowing it has been so, and fancying that if misfortune came I should bear it better than another man. 'Twas but human vanity to believe in powers which never had been tried. Self-command I have preached to myself, calmness and courage; for years I have believed I possessed them all and was Gerald Mertoun's master, and yet at the first blow I spend hours of the night in madness and railing against Fate. But one thing I can comfort myself with--that I wore a calm face and could speak like a man--until I was alone. Thank God for that."

As he sate he laid his plans for the future, knowing that he must lay out for himself such plans and be well aware of what he meant to do, that he might at no time betray himself to his kinsman and by so doing cast a shadow on his joy.

"Should he guess that it has been paid for by my despair," he said, "'twould be so marred for his kind heart that I know not how he would

bear the thought. 'Twould be to him as if he had found himself the rival of the son he loved. He has loved me, Heaven knows, and I have loved him. Tis an affection which must last."

My Lord Dunstanwolde had slept peacefully and risen early. He was full of the reflections natural to a man to whom happiness has come and the whole tenor of whose future life must be changed in its domestic aspect, whose very household must wear a brighter face, and whose entire method of existence will wear new and more youthful form. He walked forth upon his domain, glad of its beauty and the heavenly brightness of the day which showed it fair. He had spent an hour out of doors, and returning to the terrace fronting the house, where already the peacocks had begun to walk daintily, spreading or trailing their gorgeous iridescent plumes, he looked up at his kinsman's casement and gave a start. My lord Duke sate there still in his gala apparel of white and gold brocade, his breast striped by the broad blue ribbon of the Garter, jewelled stars shining on his coat.

"Gerald," he called to him in alarm, "you are still dressed! Are you ill, my dear boy!"

Osmonde rose to his feet with a quickness of movement which allayed his momentary fear; he waved his hand with a greeting smile.

"'Tis nothing," he answered, "I was a little ailing, and after 'twas past I fell asleep in my chair. The morning air has but just awaked

me."