

## CHAPTER XXVI

### A Dead Rose

Sovereigns and their thrones, statesmen and their intrigues, favourites and their quarrels--of what moment are they to a man whose heart is on fire and whose whole being resolves itself into but one thought of but one creature? My lord Duke went to France as he was commanded; he had been before at Versailles and Fontainebleau and Saint Germain, and there were eyes which brightened at the sight of his tall form, and there were men who while they greeted him with courteous bows and professions of flattering welcome exchanged side glances and asked each other momentous questions in private. He went about his business with discretion and diplomatic skill and found that he had no reason to despair of its accomplishment, but all his thoughts of his errand, though he held his mind steady and could reason clearly on them, seemed to him like the thoughts of a man in a dream who only in his private moments awakened to the reality of existence.

"'Twas Fate again," he said, "Fate! who has always seemed to stalk in between! If I had gone to her on that 'to-morrow,' I should have poured forth my soul and hers would have answered me. But there shall be another to-morrow, and I swear it shall come soon."

There was but a few hours' journey by land, and the English Channel,

between himself and London, and there was much passing to and fro; and though the French Court had stories enough of its own, new ones were always welcome, English gossip being thought to have a special heavy quaintness, droll indeed. The Court of Louis found much entertainment in the Court of Anne, and the frivolities or romances of beauties who ate beef and drank beer and wore, 'twas said, the coquettish commode founded on lovely Fontange's lace handkerchief, as if it were a nightcap.

"But they have a handsome big creature there now, who is amazing," they said with interest at this time. "She was brought up as a boy at the château of her father, and can fight with swords like a man, but is as beautiful as the day and seven feet tall. It would be a pleasure to see her. She is at present a widow with an immense fortune, and all the gentlemen fight duels over her."

Both masculine and feminine members of the Court were much pleased with this lady and found her more interesting and exciting than any of her sister beauties. Naturally many unfounded anecdotes of her were current, and it was said that she fought duels herself. It was not long before it was whispered that the handsome Englishman Monsieur le Duc d'Osmonde, the red blonde giant with the great calm eyes, was one of the two chief pretendants to this picturesque lady's favour. Thus, as was inevitable, my lord Duke heard all the rumours from the English capital in one form or another. Some of them were bitter things for him to hear, for all of them more or less touched upon Sir John Oxon, who

seemed to follow her from playhouse to assembly and to dog her very footsteps, while all the world looked on wondering, since her ladyship treated him with such unrelenting coldness and disdain.

His Grace had much to do at this time and did it well, but the days seemed long, and each piece of English gossip he heard recounted added to the length of the twenty-four hours. Then there came a story which created an excitement greater than any other, and was chattered over with a vivacity which made him turn pale.

In London the wonderful Amazon Milady Dunstanwolde had provided the town with a new example of her courage and daring spirit.

"There was a man who owned the most dangerous horse in the country--a monster, a devil." So his Grace heard the history related for the first time in a great lady's salon to breathlessly delighted listeners.

"The animal was a horror of vice and temper, but beautiful, beautiful. A skin of black satin, a form incomparable! He has three grooms who take care of him, and all of them are afraid; he bites, he kicks, he rises on his hind legs and falls on those who ride him. None but those three men dare try to manage him. Each one is a wonderful rider and hopes to win or subdue him. It is no use. One morning the first of the three enters his stable and does not come out. He is called and does not answer. Someone goes to look. He is there, but he lies in a heap, kicked to death. A few days later the second one manages to mount the horse, taking him by surprise. At first the animal seems frightened

into quietness. Suddenly he begins to run; he goes faster and faster, and all at once stops, and his rider flies over his head and is taken up with a broken neck. His owner, who is a horse dealer, orders him to be shot, but keeps him for a few days because he is so handsome. Who, think you, hears of him and comes to buy him? It is a lady. 'He is the very beast I want,' she says. 'It will please me to teach him there is someone stronger than himself.' 'Who is it?' asked the narrator, striking her fair hands together in a sort of exultation.

"The Countess of Dunstanwolde!" broke in a voice, and all turned quickly to look at the speaker. It was the Duke of Osmonde.

How did Monsieur le Duc know at once, they asked laughing, and he answered them with a slight smile, though someone remarked later that he had looked pale. He had known that she was a marvellous horsewoman, he had seen her in the hunting-field when she had been a child, he had heard of her riding dangerous animals before. Everyone knew that she was without fear. There was no other woman in England who would dare so much.

He spoke to them in almost ordinary tones, and heard their exclamations of admiration or prophetic fright to the end, but when he had driven homeward and was alone in his own apartment he felt himself cold with dread.

"And I wait here at the command of a Queen," he said, "and cannot be

loosed from my duty. And Fate may come between again--again!"--and he almost shuddered the next instant as he heard the sound which broke from his lips, 'twas so like a short, harsh laugh which mocked at his own sharp horror. "'Tis not right that a woman should so play with a man's soul," he cried fiercely; "'tis not fair she should so lay him on the rack!"

But next, manlike, his own anguish melted him.

"She does not know," he said. "If she knew she would be more gentle. She is very noble. Had I spoke with her on that to-morrow, she would have obeyed the commands my love would lay upon her."

"My Lady Dunstanwolde," he heard a day later, "has vowed to conquer her great horse or be killed by it. Each day she fights a battle with it in the park, and all the people crowd to look on. Some say it will kill her, and some she will kill it. She is so strong and without fear."

"To one of her adorers she laughed and said that if the animal broke her neck, she need battle with neither men nor horses again. The name of her horse is Devil, and he is said to look like one. Magnifique!" laughed the man who spoke.

By the third day, his Grace of Osmonde's valet began to look anxious. He had attended his master ten years and had never seen him look as he did in these days. His impression was that his Grace did not sleep,

that he had not slept for several nights. Lexton had heard him walking in his room when he ought to have been in bed; one thing was certain, he did not eat his meals, and one thing Lexton had always affirmed was that he had never known a gentleman as fine and regular in his habits as his Grace, and had always said that 'twas because he was so regular that he was such a man as he was--so noble in his build and so clear in his eye, and with such a grand bearing.

At last, turns up in the street young Langton, who had run over to Paris, as he had a habit of doing when he was out of humour with his native land, either because his creditors pressed him, or because some lady was unkind. And he stopped my lord Duke in the Rue Royale, filled to the brim with the excitement of the news he brought fresh from London.

"Has your Grace heard of my Lady Dunstanwolde's breaking of the horse Devil?" he cried. "The story has reached Paris, I know, for I heard it spoke of scarce an hour after my arrival. On Tuesday I stood in Hyde Park and watched the fight between them, and I think, God knows! that surely no woman ever mounted such a beast and ran such danger before. 'Tis the fashion to go out each morning and stand looking on and laying wagers. The stakes run high. At first the odds were all against my lady, but on Tuesday they veered and were against the horse. How they can stand and laugh, and lay bets, Heaven knows!" He was a good-natured young fellow and gave a little shudder. "I could not do it. For all her spirit and her wrists of steel, she is but a woman and a lovely

creature, and the horse is so great a demon that if he gets her from his back and beneath his feet--good Lord! it makes me sick to think of it." He shook his shoulders with a shudder again. "What think you," he cried, "I heard Jack Oxon wager? He hath been watching her day after day more fierce and eager than the rest. He turned round one moment when the beast was doing his worst and 'twas life and death between them. And she could hear his words, too, mark you. 'A thousand pounds against fifty,' he says with his sneering laugh; 'a thousand pounds that she is off his back in five minutes and that when she is dragged away, what his heels have left of her will bear no semblance to a woman!'"

"Good God!" broke from the Duke. "This within her hearing! Good God!"

"In my belief 'twas a planned thing to make her lose her nerve," said the young fellow. "'Tis my belief he would gloat over the killing of her, because she has disdained him. Why is there not some man who hath the right to stop her--I--" his honest face reddened--"what am I to dare to speak to such a lady in advice. I know it was an impudence, and felt it one, your Grace, but I plucked up courage to--to--follow her home, and says I, bowing and as red as a turkey-cock, 'My lady, for the Lord's sake give up this awfulness. Think of them that love you. Sure there must be some heart you would tear in two. For God's sake have pity on it wheresoever it be, though I beg your ladyship's pardon, and 'tis impudence, I know.'"

My lord Duke caught his hand and in the passionate gratitude of the grasp he gave it forgot his own strength and that Bob was not a giant also.

"God bless you!" he cried. "God bless you! You are a brave fellow! I--I am her kinsman and am grateful. God bless you, man, and call on Gerald Mertoun for a friend's service when you need it."

And he strode away, leaving Bob Langton staring after him and holding his crushed hand tenderly, but feeling a glow at his heart, for 'tis not every day a careless, empty-pocketed young ensign is disabled by the grasp of a Duke's hand, and given his friendship as the result of a mere artless impulse of boyish good-nature.

His Grace strode homeward and called Lexton to him.

"We go to England within an hour," he said. "We may remain there but a day. Not a moment is to be lost. 'Tis of most serious import."

When he entered Osmonde House, on reaching the end of his journey, the first person he encountered was Mr. Fox, who had just come in from Hyde Park, where he had spent the morning.

"I have been there each day this week, your Grace," he said, and his lips trembled somewhat as he wiped his brow. "It hath seemed to me all the town hath been there. I--your Grace's pardon--but I could not stay



away; it seemed almost a duty. But I would gladly have been spared it. The worst is over." And he wiped his brow again, his thin, clerical countenance pale. "They say the horse is beat; but who knows when such a beast is safe, and at this moment she puts him through his paces, and they all look on applauding."

His Grace had rung the bell. "Bring Rupert," he commanded. "Rupert."

And the beast was brought without delay--as fiery a creature as the horse Devil himself, yet no demon but a spirited brute, knowing his master as his master knew himself; and my lord Duke came forth and flung himself upon him, and the creature sprang forward as if they had been one, and he felt in every nerve that his rider rode with heart beating with passion which was resolute to overleap every obstacle in its way, which had reached the hour when it would see none, hear of none, submit to none, but sweep forward to its goal as though 'twere wind or flame.

A short hour later all the town knew that my Lady Dunstanwolde had sealed her brilliant fate. And 'twas not Sir John Oxon who was conqueror, but his Grace of Osmonde, who, it seemed, had swept down upon her and taken possession of his place by her side as a King might have descended on some citadel and claimed it for his own. Great Heaven! what a thing it had been to behold, and how those congratulated themselves who had indeed beheld it--my lord Duke appearing upon the

scene as if by magic, he who had been known to be in France, and who came almost at full gallop beneath the trees, plainly scarce seeing the startled faces turned at the sound of his horse's hoofs, the hats which were doffed at sight of him, the fair faces which lighted, the lovely, hurried courtesies made, his own eyes being fixed upon a certain point on the riding-road where groups stood about and her ladyship of Dunstanwolde sat erect and glowing upon the back of her conquered beast, the black horse Devil!

"Zounds, 'twas like a play!" cried Sir Christopher, gloating over it when 'twas past. "There rides my lady like an empress, Devil going as dainty as a dancing-master, and all the grandees doffing hats to her down the line. And of a sudden one man hears hoofs pounding and turns, and there he comes, my lord Duke of Osmonde, and he sees but one creature and makes straight for her--and she doth not even hear him till he is close upon her, and then she turns--blushing, good Lord! the loveliest crimson woman ever wore. And in each other's eyes they gaze as if Heaven's gate had opened, and 'twas not earth that was beneath their horses' feet, and both forgot that poor plain flesh and blood stood looking on!"

"Lud!" minced Lady Betty, applauding with her fan. "We must have it made into a play and Mrs. Bracegirdle shall perform it."

"My old heart thumped to see it!" said Sir Chris; "it thumped, I swear!" and he gave his stout side a feeling blow. "All her days I have

known her, and it came back to me how, when she was but a vixen of twelve we dubbed her Duchess, and, ecod! the water came into my eyes!"

"Because she was a vixen, or because you called her Duchess?" said my Lady Betty, with her malicious little air.

Sir Christopher stared at her; there was a touch of moisture in his old eyes, 'twas true!

"Nay," he said, bluntly, "because she is such a damned fine woman, and 'tis all come true!"

The words these two had exchanged before the eyes of the world only themselves could know--they had been but few, surely, and yet in ten minutes after their first speech all those who gazed knew that the tale was told. And as they rode homeward together beneath the arching trees and through the crowded streets, their faces wore such looks as drew each passer-by to turn and gaze after them, and to themselves the whole great world had changed; and of a surety, nowhere, nowhere, two hearts beat to such music, or two souls swayed together in such unison.

When they rode into the court at Dunstanwolde House, the lacqueys, seeing them, drew up in state about the entrance.

"Look you," said, in an undertone to his fellow, one of the biggest and sauciest of them, "'tis her Grace of Osmonde who returns, and we may be

a great Duke's servants if we carry ourselves with dignity."

They bowed their lowest as the two passed between them, but neither the one nor the other beheld them, scarce knowing that they were present. My lady's sweet, tall body trembled, and her mouth's crimson trembled also, almost as if she had been a child. She could not speak, but looked up, softly smiling, as she led him to a panelled parlour, which was her own chosen and beloved room. And when they entered it, and the door closed, my lord Duke, having no words either, put forth his arms and took her to his heart, folding her close so that she felt his pulsing breast shake. And then he drew her to the gilded chair and made her sit, and knelt down before her, and laid his face upon her lap.

"Let it stay there," he cried, low and even wildly. "Let it stay there--Heart. If you could know--if you could know!"

And then in broken words he told her of how, when she had sate in this same chair before and given him her dead lord's message, he had so madly yearned to throw himself at her feet upon his knees, and hide his anguished face where now it lay, while her sweet hand touched his cheek.

"I love you," she whispered, very low and with a soft, helpless sob in her voice. "I love you," for she could think of no other words to say, and could say no more. And with tears in his lion's eyes he kissed her hands a thousand times as if he had been a boy.

"When I was in France," he said, "and heard of the danger that you ran, my heart rebelled against you. I cried that 'twas not just to so put a man to torture and bind him to the rack. And then I repented and said you did not know or you would be more gentle."

"I will be gentle now," she said, "always, your Grace, always."

"When the sun rose each day," he said, "I could not know it did not rise upon your beauty, lying cold and still, lost--lost to me--this time, forever."

Her fair hand covered her eyes, she shuddering a little.

"Nay, nay," she cried. "I--nay, I could not be lost to you--again. Let us--let us pray God, your Grace, let us pray God!"

And to his heavenly rapture she put forth her arms and laid them round his neck, her face held back that she might gaze at him with her great brimming eyes. Indeed 'twas a wonder to a man to behold how her stateliness had melted and she was like a yearning, clinging girl.

He gazed at her a moment, kneeling so, and all the long years rolled away and he scarce dared to breathe lest he should waken from his dream.

"Ah, Heaven!" he sighed, "there is so much to tell--years, years of pain which your sweet soul will pity."

Ah, how she gazed on him, what longing question there was in her eyes!

He took from his breast a velvet case which might have held a miniature, but did not.

"Look--look," he prayed, "at this. Tis a dead rose."

"A rose!" says she, and then starts and looks up from it to him, a dawning of some thought--or hope--in her face. "A rose!" she uttered, scarcely breathing it, as if half afraid to speak.

"Ah!" he cried, "I pray God you remember. When it fell from your breast that night----"

She broke in, breathless, "The night you came----"

"Too late--too late," he answered; "and this fell at my feet, and you passed by. No night since then I have not pressed it to my lips. No day it has not lain upon my heart through all its darkest hours."

She took it from him--gazed down at it with stormy, filling eyes, and pressing it to her lips, broke into tender, passionate sobbing.

"No night, no day!" she cried. "Poor rose! dear rose!"

"Beloved!" he cried, and would have folded her to his breast, kissing her tears away which were so womanly. But she withdrew herself a little--holding up her hand.

"Wait, your Grace; wait!" she said, as if she would say more, almost as if she was shaken by some strange trouble and knew not how to bear its presence. And, of a sudden, seeing this, a vague fear struck him and he turned a little pale.

But the next moment he controlled himself; 'twas indeed as if he himself called the receding blood back to his heart, and he took her hand and held it in both his own, smiling.

"I have waited so long," he pleaded, caressingly. "I pray you--in Love's name."

And it was but like her, he thought, that she should rise at this and stand before him, her hand laid upon her breast, her great eyes opening upon him in appeal, as if she were some tender culprit standing at judgment bar.

"In Love's name!" she cried, in a low, panting voice. "Oh, Love should give so much. A woman's treasury should be so filled with rich jewels of fair deeds that when Love comes she may pour them at his feet. And

what have I--oh, what have I?"

He moved towards her with a noble gesture, and she came nearer and laid one hand upon his breast and one upon his shoulder, her uplifted face white as a lily from some wild emotion, and imploring him--the thought coming to him made him tremble--as some lost, helpless child might implore.

"Is there aught," she panted, "aught that could come between your soul and mine?" And she was trembling, and her voice trembled and her lips, and crystal drops on her lashes which, in quivering, fell.

"Think," she whispered; "your Grace, think."

And then a storm swept over him, a storm of love as great as that first storm of frenzy and despair. And he cried out in terror at the thought that Fate might plan some trick to cheat him yet, after the years--the years of lost, lost life, spent as in gyves of iron.

"Great God! No! No!" he cried; "I am a man and you are the life of me! I come to you not as other men, who love and speak their passion. Mine has been a burden hidden and borne so long. It woke at sight of a child, it fed on visions of a girl; before I knew its power it had become my life. The portals of my prison are open and I see the sun. Think you I will let them be closed--be closed again?"

And he would not be withheld and swept her to his breast, and she,



lying there, clung to him with a little sobbing cry of joy and gratefulness, uttering wild, sweet, low, broken words.

"I am so young," she said. "Life is so strong; the world seems full of flowers. Sure some of them are mine. My heart beats so--it so beats. Forgive! forgive!"

"Tis from to-day our life begins," he whispered, solemnly. "And God so deal with me, Heart, as I shall deal with you."