

CHAPTER XVIII

THE FIFTEENTH EARL OF MOUNT DUNSTAN

James Hubert John Fergus Saltyre--fifteenth Earl of Mount Dunstan, "Jem Salter," as his neighbours on the Western ranches had called him, the red-haired, second-class passenger of the Meridiana, sat in the great library of his desolate great house, and stared fixedly through the open window at the lovely land spread out before him. From this particular window was to be seen one of the greatest views in England. From the upper nurseries he had lived in as a child he had seen it every day from morning until night, and it had seemed to his young fancy to cover all the plains of the earth. Surely the rest of the world, he had thought, could be but small--though somewhere he knew there was London where the

Queen lived, and in London were Buckingham Palace and St. James Palace and Kensington and the Tower, where heads had been chopped off; and the Horse Guards, where splendid, plumed soldiers rode forth glittering, with thrilling trumpets sounding as they moved. These last he always remembered, because he had seen them, and once when he had walked in the park with his nurse there had been an excited stir in the Row, and people had crowded about a certain gate, through which an escorted carriage had been driven, and he had been made at once to take off his hat and stand bareheaded until it passed, because it was the Queen. Somehow from that afternoon he dated the first presentation of certain vaguely miserable ideas. Inquiries made of his attendant, when the

cortege had swept by, had elicited the fact that the Royal Lady herself had children--little boys who were princes and little girls who were princesses. What curious and persistent child cross-examination on his part had drawn forth the fact that almost all the people who drove about and looked so happy and brilliant, were the fathers or mothers of little boys like, yet--in some mysterious way--unlike himself? And in what manner had he gathered that he was different from them? His nurse, it is true, was not a pleasant person, and had an injured and resentful bearing. In later years he realised that it had been the bearing of an irregularly paid menial, who rebelled against the fact that her place was not among people who were of distinction and high repute, and whose households bestowed a certain social status upon their servitors. She was a tall woman with a sour face and a bearing which conveyed a glum endurance of a position beneath her. Yes, it had been from her--Brough her name was--that he had mysteriously gathered that he was not a desirable charge, as regarded from the point of the servants' hall--or, in fact, from any other point. His people were not the people whose patronage was sought with anxious eagerness. For some reason their town house was objectionable, and Mount Dunstan was without attractions. Other big houses were, in some marked way, different. The town house he objected to himself as being gloomy and ugly, and possessing only a bare and battered nursery, from whose windows one could not even obtain a satisfactory view of the Mews, where at least, there were horses and grooms who hissed cheerfully while they curried and brushed them. He hated the town house and was, in fact, very glad that he was scarcely ever taken to it. People, it seemed, did not care to come either to

the town house or to Mount Dunstan. That was why he did not know other little boys. Again--for the mysterious reason--people did not care that their children should associate with him. How did he discover this? He never knew exactly. He realised, however, that without distinct statements, he seemed to have gathered it through various disconnected talks with Brough. She had not remained with him long, having "bettered herself" greatly and gone away in glum satisfaction, but she had stayed long enough to convey to him things which became part of his existence, and smouldered in his little soul until they became part of himself. The ancestors who had hewn their way through their enemies with battle-axes, who had been fierce and cruel and unconquerable in their savage pride, had handed down to him a burning and unsubmissive soul. At six years old, walking with Brough in Kensington Gardens, and seeing other children playing under the care of nurses, who, he learned, were not inclined to make advances to his attendant, he dragged Brough away with a fierce little hand and stood apart with her, scowling haughtily, his head in the air, pretending that he disdained all childish gambols, and would have declined to join in them, even if he had been besought to so far unbend. Bitterness had been planted in him then, though he had not understood, and the sourness of Brough had been connected with no intelligence which might have caused her to suspect his feelings, and no one had noticed, and if anyone had noticed, no one would have cared in the very least.

When Brough had gone away to her far superior place, and she had been succeeded by one variety of objectionable or incompetent person after

another, he had still continued to learn. In different ways he silently collected information, and all of it was unpleasant, and, as he grew older, it took for some years one form. Lack of resources, which should of right belong to persons of rank, was the radical objection to his people. At the town house there was no money, at Mount Dunstan there was no money. There had been so little money even in his grandfather's time that his father had inherited comparative beggary. The fourteenth Earl of Mount Dunstan did not call it "comparative" beggary, he called it beggary pure and simple, and cursed his progenitors with engaging frankness. He never referred to the fact that in his personable youth he had married a wife whose fortune, if it had not been squandered, might have restored his own. The fortune had been squandered in the course of a few years of riotous living, the wife had died when her third son was born, which event took place ten years after the birth of her second, whom she had lost through scarlet fever. James Hubert John Fergus Saltyre never heard much of her, and barely knew of her past existence because in the picture gallery he had seen a portrait of a tall, thin, fretful-looking young lady, with light ringlets, and pearls round her neck. She had not attracted him as a child, and the fact that he gathered that she had been his mother left him entirely unmoved. She was not a loveable-looking person, and, indeed, had been at once empty-headed, irritable, and worldly. He would probably have been no less lonely if she had lived. Lonely he was. His father was engaged in a career much too lively and interesting to himself to admit of his allowing himself to be bored by an unwanted and entirely superfluous child. The elder son, who was Lord Tenham, had reached a premature

and degenerate maturity by the time the younger one made his belated appearance, and regarded him with unconcealed dislike. The worst thing which could have befallen the younger boy would have been intimate association with this degenerate youth.

As Saltyre left nursery days behind, he learned by degrees that the objection to himself and his people, which had at first endeavoured to explain itself as being the result of an unseemly lack of money, combined with that unpleasant feature, an uglier one--namely, lack of decent reputation. Angry duns, beggarliness of income, scarcity of the necessaries and luxuries which dignity of rank demanded, the indifference and slights of one's equals, and the ignoring of one's existence by exalted persons, were all hideous enough to Lord Mount Dunstan and his elder son--but they were not so hideous as was, to his younger son, the childish, shamed frenzy of awakening to the truth that he was one of a bad lot--a disgraceful lot, from whom nothing was expected but shifty ways, low vices, and scandals, which in the end could not even be kept out of the newspapers. The day came, in fact, when the worst of these was seized upon by them and filled their sheets with matter which for a whole season decent London avoided reading, and the fast and indecent element laughed, derided, or gloated over.

The memory of the fever of the monstrous weeks which had passed at this time was not one it was wise for a man to recall. But it was not to be forgotten--the hasty midnight arrival at Mount Dunstan of father and son, their haggard, nervous faces, their terrified discussions, and

argumentative raging when they were shut up together behind locked doors, the appearance of legal advisers who looked as anxious as themselves, but failed to conceal the disgust with which they were battling, the knowledge that tongues were clacking almost hysterically in the village, and that curious faces hurried to the windows when even a menial from the great house passed, the atmosphere of below-stairs whispers, and jogged elbows, and winks, and giggles; the final desperate, excited preparations for flight, which might be ignominiously stopped at any moment by the intervention of the law, the huddling away at night time, the hot-throated fear that the shameful, self-branding move might be too late--the burning humiliation of knowing the inevitable result of public contempt or laughter when the world next day heard that the fugitives had put the English Channel between themselves and their country's laws.

Lord Tenham had died a few years later at Port Said, after descending into all the hells of degenerate debauch. His father had lived longer--long enough to make of himself something horribly near an imbecile, before he died suddenly in Paris. The Mount Dunstan who succeeded him, having spent his childhood and boyhood under the shadow of the "bad lot," had the character of being a big, surly, unattractive young fellow, whose eccentricity presented itself to those who knew his stock, as being of a kind which might develop at any time into any objectionable tendency. His bearing was not such as allured, and his fortune was not of the order which placed a man in the view of the world. He had no money to expend, no hospitalities to offer and

apparently no disposition to connect himself with society. His wild-goose chase to America had, when it had been considered worth while discussing at all, been regarded as being very much the kind of thing a Mount Dunstan might do with some secret and disreputable end in view. No one had heard the exact truth, and no one would have been inclined to believe if they had heard it. That he had lived as plain Jem Salter, and laboured as any hind might have done, in desperate effort and mad hope, would not have been regarded as a fact to be credited. He had gone away, he had squandered money, he had returned, he was at Mount Dunstan again, living the life of an objectionable recluse--objectionable, because the owner of a place like Mount Dunstan should be a power and an influence in the county, should be counted upon as a dispenser of hospitalities, as a supporter of charities, as a dignitary of weight. He was none of these--living no one knew how, slouching about with his gun, riding or walking sullenly over the roads and marshland.

Just one man knew him intimately, and this one had been from his fifteenth year the sole friend of his life. He had come, then--the Reverend Lewis Penzance--a poor and unhealthy scholar, to be vicar of the parish of Dunstan. Only a poor and book-absorbed man would have accepted the position. What this man wanted was no more than quiet, pure country air to fill frail lungs, a roof over his head, and a place to pore over books and manuscripts. He was a born monk and celibate--in by-gone centuries he would have lived peacefully in some monastery, spending his years in the reading and writing of black letter and the

illuminating of missals. At the vicarage he could lead an existence which was almost the same thing.

At Mount Dunstan there remained still the large remnant of a great library. A huge room whose neglected and half emptied shelves contained some strange things and wonderful ones, though all were in disorder, and given up to dust and natural dilapidation. Inevitably the Reverend Lewis Penzance had found his way there, inevitably he had gained indifferently bestowed permission to entertain himself by endeavouring to reduce to order and to make an attempt at cataloguing. Inevitably, also, the hours he spent in the place became the chief sustenance of his being.

There, one day, he had come upon an uncouth-looking boy with deep eyes and a shaggy crop of red hair. The boy was poring over an old volume, and was plainly not disposed to leave it. He rose, not too graciously, and replied to the elder man's greeting, and the friendly questions which followed. Yes, he was the youngest son of the house. He had nothing to do, and he liked the library. He often came there and sat and read things. There were some queer old books and a lot of stupid ones. The book he was reading now? Oh, that (with a slight reddening of his skin and a little awkwardness at the admission) was one of those he liked best. It was one of the queer ones, but interesting for all that.

It was about their own people--the generations of Mount Dunstans who had lived in the centuries past. He supposed he liked it because there were a lot of odd stories and exciting things in it. Plenty of fighting and adventure. There had been some splendid fellows among them. (He was

beginning to forget himself a little by this time.) They were afraid of nothing. They were rather like savages in the earliest days, but at that time all the rest of the world was savage. But they were brave, and it was odd how decent they were very often. What he meant was--what he liked was, that they were men--even when they were barbarians. You couldn't be ashamed of them. Things they did then could not be done now, because the world was different, but if--well, the kind of men they were might do England a lot of good if they were alive to-day. They would be different themselves, of course, in one way--but they must be the same men in others. Perhaps Mr. Penzance (reddening again) understood what he meant. He knew himself very well, because he had thought it all out, he was always thinking about it, but he was no good at explaining.

Mr. Penzance was interested. His outlook on the past and the present had always been that of a bookworm, but he understood enough to see that he had come upon a temperament novel enough to awaken curiosity. The apparently entirely neglected boy, of a type singularly unlike that of his father and elder brother, living his life virtually alone in the big place, and finding food to his taste in stories of those of his blood whose dust had mingled with the earth centuries ago, provided him with a new subject for reflection.

That had been the beginning of an unusual friendship. Gradually Penzance had reached a clear understanding of all the building of the young life, of its rankling humiliation, and the qualities of mind and body which made for rebellion. It sometimes thrilled him to see in the big frame

and powerful muscles, in the strong nature and unconquerable spirit, a revival of what had burned and stirred through lives lived in a dim, almost mythical, past. There were legends of men with big bodies, fierce faces, and red hair, who had done big deeds, and conquered in dark and barbarous days, even Fate's self, as it had seemed. None could overthrow them, none could stand before their determination to attain that which they chose to claim. Students of heredity knew that there were curious instances of revival of type. There had been a certain Red Godwyn who had ruled his piece of England before the Conqueror came, and who had defied the interloper with such splendid arrogance and superhuman lack of fear that he had won in the end, strangely enough, the admiration and friendship of the royal savage himself, who saw, in his, a kindred savagery, a power to be well ranged, through love, if not through fear, upon his own side. This Godwyn had a deep attraction for his descendant, who knew the whole story of his fierce life--as told in one yellow manuscript and another--by heart. Why might not one fancy--Penzance was drawn by the imagining--this strong thing reborn, even as the offspring of a poorer effete type. Red Godwyn springing into being again, had been stronger than all else, and had swept weakness before him as he had done in other and far-off days.

In the old library it fell out in time that Penzance and the boy spent the greater part of their days. The man was a bookworm and a scholar, young Saltyre had a passion for knowledge. Among the old books and manuscripts he gained a singular education. Without a guide he could not have gathered and assimilated all he did gather and assimilate. Together

the two rummaged forgotten shelves and chests, and found forgotten things. That which had drawn the boy from the first always drew and absorbed him--the annals of his own people. Many a long winter evening the pair turned over the pages of volumes and of parchment, and followed with eager interest and curiosity the records of wild lives--stories of warriors and abbots and bards, of feudal lords at ruthless war with each other, of besiegings and battles and captives and torments. Legends there were of small kingdoms torn asunder, of the slaughter of their kings, the mad fightings of their barons, and the faith or unfaith of their serfs. Here and there the eternal power revealed itself in some story of lawful or unlawful love--for dame or damsel, royal lady, abbess, or high-born nun--ending in the welding of two lives or in rapine, violence, and death. There were annals of early England, and of marauders, monks, and Danes. And, through all these, some thing, some man or woman, place, or strife linked by some tie with Mount Dunstan blood. In past generations, it seemed plain, there had been certain of the line who had had pride in these records, and had sought and collected them; then had been born others who had not cared. Sometimes the relations were inadequate, sometimes they wore an unauthentic air, but most of them seemed, even after the passing of centuries, human documents, and together built a marvellous great drama of life and power, wickedness and passion and daring deeds.

When the shameful scandal burst forth young Saltyre was seen by neither his father nor his brother. Neither of them had any desire to see him; in fact, each detested the idea of confronting by any chance his hot,

intolerant eyes. "The Brat," his father had called him in his childhood, "The Lout," when he had grown big-limbed and clumsy. Both he and Tenham were sick enough, without being called upon to contemplate "The Lout," whose opinion, in any case, they preferred not to hear.

Saltyre, during the hideous days, shut himself up in the library. He did not leave the house, even for exercise, until after the pair had fled. His exercise he took in walking up and down from one end of the long room to another. Devils were let loose in him. When Penzance came to him, he saw their fury in his eyes, and heard it in the savagery of his laugh.

He kicked an ancient volume out of his way as he strode to and fro.

"There has been plenty of the blood of the beast in us in bygone times," he said, "but it was not like this. Savagery in savage days had its excuse. This is the beast sunk into the gibbering, degenerate ape."

Penzance came and spent hours of each day with him. Part of his rage was the rage of a man, but he was a boy still, and the boyishness of his bitterly hurt youth was a thing to move to pity. With young blood, and young pride, and young expectancy rising within him, he was at an hour when he should have felt himself standing upon the threshold of the world, gazing out at the splendid joys and promises and powerful deeds of it--waiting only the fit moment to step forth and win his place.

"But we are done for," he shouted once. "We are done for. And I am as much done for as they are. Decent people won't touch us. That is where the last Mount Dunstan stands." And Penzance heard in his voice an absolute break. He stopped and marched to the window at the end of the long room, and stood in dead stillness, staring out at the down-sweeping lines of heavy rain.

The older man thought many things, as he looked at his big back and body. He stood with his legs astride, and Penzance noted that his right hand was clenched on his hip, as a man's might be as he clenched the hilt of his sword--his one mate who might avenge him even when, standing at bay, he knew that the end had come, and he must fall. Primeval Force--the thin-faced, narrow-chested, slightly bald clergyman of the Church of England was thinking--never loses its way, or fails to sweep a path before it. The sun rises and sets, the seasons come and go, Primeval Force is of them, and as unchangeable. Much of it stood before him embodied in this strongly sentient thing. In this way the Reverend Lewis found his thoughts leading him, and he--being moved to the depths of a fine soul--felt them profoundly interesting, and even sustaining.

He sat in a high-backed chair, holding its arms with long thin hands, and looking for some time at James Hubert John Fergus Saltyre. He said, at last, in a sane level voice:

"Lord Tenham is not the last Mount Dunstan."

After which the stillness remained unbroken again for some minutes. Saltyre did not move or make any response, and, when he left his place at the window, he took up a book, and they spoke of other things.

When the fourteenth Earl died in Paris, and his younger son succeeded, there came a time when the two companions sat together in the library again. It was the evening of a long day spent in discouraging hard work. In the morning they had ridden side by side over the estate, in the afternoon they had sat and pored over accounts, leases, maps, plans. By nightfall both were fagged and neither in sanguine mood.

Mount Dunstan had sat silent for some time. The pair often sat silent. This pause was ended by the young man's rising and standing up, stretching his limbs.

"It was a queer thing you said to me in this room a few years ago," he said. "It has just come back to me."

Singularly enough--or perhaps naturally enough--it had also just arisen again from the depths of Penzance's subconsciousness.

"Yes," he answered, "I remember. To-night it suggests premonition. Your brother was not the last Mount Dunstan."

"In one sense he never was Mount Dunstan at all," answered the other

man. Then he suddenly threw out his arms in a gesture whose whole significance it would have been difficult to describe. There was a kind of passion in it. "I am the last Mount Dunstan," he harshly laughed. "Moi qui vous parle! The last."

Penzance's eyes resting on him took upon themselves the far-seeing look of a man who watches the world of life without living in it. He presently shook his head.

"No," he said. "I don't see that. No--not the last. Believe me."

And singularly, in truth, Mount Dunstan stood still and gazed at him without speaking. The eyes of each rested in the eyes of the other. And, as had happened before, they followed the subject no further. From that moment it dropped.

Only Penzance had known of his reasons for going to America. Even the family solicitors, gravely holding interviews with him and restraining expression of their absolute disapproval of such employment of his inadequate resources, knew no more than that this Mount Dunstan, instead of wasting his beggarly income at Cairo, or Monte Carlo, or in Paris as the last one had done, prefers to waste it in newer places. The head of the firm, when he bids him good-morning and leaves him alone, merely shrugs his shoulders and returns to his letter writing with the corners of his elderly mouth hard set.

Penzance saw him off--and met him upon his return. In the library they sat and talked it over, and, having done so, closed the book of the episode.

He sat at the table, his eyes upon the wide-spread loveliness of the landscape, but his thought elsewhere. It wandered over the years already lived through, wandering backwards even to the days when existence, opening before the child eyes, was a baffling and vaguely unhappy thing.

When the door opened and Penzance was ushered in by a servant, his face wore the look his friend would have been rejoiced to see swept away to return no more.

Then let us take our old accustomed seat and begin some casual talk, which will draw him out of the shadows, and make him forget such things as it is not good to remember. That is what we have done many times in the past, and may find it well to do many a time again.

He begins with talk of the village and the country-side. Village stories are often quaint, and stories of the countryside are sometimes--not always--interesting. Tom Benson's wife has presented him with triplets, and there is great excitement in the village, as to the steps to be taken to secure the three guineas given by the Queen as a reward for this feat. Old Benny Bates has announced his intention of taking a fifth

wife at the age of ninety, and is indignant that it has been suggested that the parochial authorities in charge of the "Union," in which he must inevitably shortly take refuge, may interfere with his rights as a citizen. The Reverend Lewis has been to talk seriously with him, and finds him at once irate and obdurate.

"Vicar," says old Benny, "he can't refuse to marry no man. Law won't let him." Such refusal, he intimates, might drive him to wild and riotous living. Remembering his last view of old Benny tottering down the village street in his white smock, his nut-cracker face like a withered rosy apple, his gnarled hand grasping the knotted staff his bent body leaned on, Mount Dunstan grinned a little. He did not smile when Penzance passed to the restoration of the ancient church at Mellowdene. "Restoration" usually meant the tearing away of ancient oaken, high-backed pews, and the instalment of smug new benches, suggesting suburban Dissenting chapels, such as the feudal soul revolts at. Neither did he smile at a reference to the gathering at Dunholm Castle, which was twelve miles away. Dunholm was the possession of a man who stood for all that was first and highest in the land, dignity, learning, exalted character, generosity, honour. He and the late Lord Mount Dunstan had been born in the same year, and had succeeded to their titles almost at the same time. There had arrived a period when they had ceased to know each other. All that the one man intrinsically was, the other man was not. All that the one estate, its castle, its village, its tenantry, represented, was the antipodes of that which the other stood for. The one possession held its place a silent, and perhaps, unconscious

reproach to the other. Among the guests, forming the large house party which London social news had already recorded in its columns, were great and honourable persons, and interesting ones, men and women who counted

as factors in all good and dignified things accomplished. Even in the present Mount Dunstan's childhood, people of their world had ceased to cross his father's threshold. As one or two of the most noticeable names were mentioned, mentally he recalled this, and Penzance, quick to see the thought in his eyes, changed the subject.

"At Stornham village an unexpected thing has happened," he said. "One of the relatives of Lady Anstruthers has suddenly appeared--a sister. You may remember that the poor woman was said to be the daughter of some rich American, and it seemed unexplainable that none of her family ever appeared, and things were allowed to go from bad to worse. As it was understood that there was so much money people were mystified by the condition of things."

"Anstruthers has had money to squander," said Mount Dunstan. "Tenham and

he were intimates. The money he spends is no doubt his wife's. As her family deserted her she has no one to defend her."

"Certainly her family has seemed to neglect her for years. Perhaps they were disappointed in his position. Many Americans are extremely ambitious. These international marriages are often singular things. Now--apparently without having been expected--the sister appears.

Vanderpoel is the name--Miss Vanderpoel."

"I crossed the Atlantic with her in the Meridiana," said Mount Dunstan.

"Indeed! That is interesting. You did not, of course, know that she was coming here."

"I knew nothing of her but that she was a saloon passenger with a suite of staterooms, and I was in the second cabin. Nothing? That is not quite true, perhaps. Stewards and passengers gossip, and one cannot close one's ears. Of course one heard constant reiteration of the number of millions her father possessed, and the number of cabins she managed to occupy. During the confusion and alarm of the collision, we spoke to each other."

He did not mention the other occasion on which he had seen her. There seemed, on the whole, no special reason why he should.

"Then you would recognise her, if you saw her. I heard to-day that she seems an unusual young woman, and has beauty."

"Her eyes and lashes are remarkable. She is tall. The Americans are setting up a new type."

"Yes, they used to send over slender, fragile little women. Lady Anstruthers was the type. I confess to an interest in the sister."

"Why?"

"She has made a curious impression. She has begun to do things. Stornham village has lost its breath." He laughed a little. "She has been going over the place and discussing repairs."

Mount Dunstan laughed also. He remembered what she had said. And she had actually begun.

"That is practical," he commented.

"It is really interesting. Why should a young woman turn her attention to repairs? If it had been her father--the omnipotent Mr. Vanderpoel--who had appeared, one would not have wondered at such practical activity. But a young lady--with remarkable eyelashes!"

His elbows were on the arm of his chair, and he had placed the tips of his fingers together, wearing an expression of such absorbed contemplation that Mount Dunstan laughed again.

"You look quite dreamy over it," he said.

"It allures me. Unknown quantities in character always allure me. I should like to know her. A community like this is made up of the

absolutely known quantity--of types repeating themselves through centuries. A new one is almost a startling thing. Gossip over teacups is not usually entertaining to me, but I found myself listening to little Miss Laura Brunel this afternoon with rather marked attention. I confess to having gone so far as to make an inquiry or so. Sir Nigel Anstruthers is not often at Stornham. He is away now. It is plainly not he who is interested in repairs."

"He is on the Riviera, in retreat, in a place he is fond of," Mount Dunstan said drily. "He took a companion with him. A new infatuation. He will not return soon."