

CHAPTER XXIII

STARLIGHT

Dusk had begun to fall, but still two figures went on through the forest--slowly, with obvious effort. One turned often to the other, held back a branch, or proffered such service as he might over rough places, for Betty Dalrymple's movements were no longer those of a lithe wood-nymph; she had never felt so weary before. The first shades of twilight made it harder to distinguish their way amid intervening objects, and once an elastic bit of underbrush struck her sharply in the face. The blow smarted like the touch of a whip but she only smiled faintly. The momentary sting spurred her on faster, until her foot caught and she stumbled and would have fallen except that Mr. Heatherbloom had turned at that moment and put out an arm.

"Forgive me." His voice was full of contrition. "It has been brutal to make you go on like this, but I had to."

"It doesn't matter." The slender form slid from him over-quickly. "You, too, must be very tired," she said with breath coming fast.

He glanced swiftly back; listened. "We'll rest here," he commanded.

"We've got to. I should have stopped before, but"--the words came in a harsher staccato--"I dared not."

"I'll be all right in a few moments," she answered, resting on a fallen log, "and then--"

"No, no," he said in a tone of finality. "After all, there is small likelihood they'll find us now. Besides, it will soon be too dark to go on. Fortunately, the night is warm, and I've got this cloak for you."

"And for yourself?" Her voice was very low and quiet, or perhaps it seemed so because here, in the little recess in the great wood, the hush was most pronounced.

"Me?" he laughed. "You seem to forget I'm one of the happy brotherhood that just drop down anywhere. Shouldn't know what to do with a silk eiderdown if I had one."

His gaiety sounded rather forced. She was silent and the quietude seemed oppressive. The girl leaned back to a great tree trunk and looked up. The sky wore an ocher hue against which the branches quivered in zigzags of blackness. Mr. Heatherbloom moved apart to watch, but still he neither saw nor heard sign of any one drawing near. The sad ocher merged into a somber blue; the stars came out, one by one, then in shoals. She could hardly see him now, so fast had the tropical night descended, but she heard his step, returning.

"Quite certain there's no danger," he reassured her. "Went back a way."

"Thank you," she said. And added: "For all."

"Betty." The stars twinkled madly. Pulsating waves seemed to vibrate in the air. A moment he continued to stare into the darkness, then again turned. He had not seen how the girl's hand had suddenly closed, and her slender form had swayed. As restlessly he resumed his sentinel's duty, Sonia Turgeinov's last words once more recurred to him. How often had he thought of them that long afternoon, and wondered who was the one the young girl would now shortly be free to turn to? There had been many in the past who had sought her favor. Perhaps the unknown was one of these; or, more likely, one of the newer many that had arisen, no doubt, since, in the gayer larger world of New York, or the continent. Betty Dalrymple's manner at the Russian woman's words indicated that the latter had--how Mr. Heatherbloom could not imagine--hit upon a great kernel of truth. Again, in fancy, he saw on her cheek that swift flush of warm blood. Lucky, thrice lucky, the man who had caused it! Softly Mr. Heatherbloom moved nearer.

Was she sleeping? He, himself, felt too fagged to sleep. Like Psyche, in the glade, she was covered all with starlight. He ventured closer, bent over; the widely opened eyes looked suddenly into his.

"The woman told me you had nothing to do with it--that plot of hers and the prince," she said slowly. "I know now why you were on the boat, and--all the rest--what it meant for me, your being there."

"You know, then"--embarrassed--"the awful mess I made of it all--"

"You dared a great deal," she said softly.

"And came an awful cropper!"

She did not answer directly. "At first Francois was most reluctant to risk going with me," she went on. "I thought it odd, at the time, he should change so suddenly, become so brave. Now I understand, at least, a little--in a general way. I have been over-quick to think evil of you, ever since we met again. Perhaps, in the past, too"--slowly--"I have been--"

"Betty!" he cried uneasily, and seemed about once more to move away, when--

"Don't go," she said. "I'll not talk if you command me not to. You've been the master to-day, you know," with subtle accent.

"Have I?" His voice showed evidence of distress. "I didn't really mean--it was necessary," he ended firmly.

"Of course it was," said the girl. Her accent conveyed no note of displeasure. Profile-wise he saw her face now--the young moon beyond.

"Don't think I'm blaming you. I'm not quite so hard, perhaps, as I once

was." Mr. Heatherbloom stood back a little farther in the shadow.

"Maybe, my poor little standard of judgment--" she stopped. "I have been heedless, heartless, perhaps--"

"You!" he exclaimed. "You!" There was only unfaltering adoration in his tone--faith, unchanged and unchangeable.

She spoke with a little catch in her voice: "Oh, I haven't cared. I did flirt with the prince; he accused me of that. He was right. What did it matter to me, if I made others suffer? I haven't always had so good a time as I seemed to--" There was a ring of passion in her tone now. "What happened?" she said, turning on him swiftly. "What has happened? I want to know all--"

"You mean about the prince?"

"I know all I want to know about him," scornfully. "I mean"--her slender figure bent toward Mr. Heatherbloom--"you! What has taken place, and why has it? What does it all mean? Don't you understand?"

He drew in his breath slowly.

"Tell me," she said, still tensely poised, her eyes insistent in the shadow of her hair.

"Miss Dalrymple--Betty--" he half stammered.

"I want to know," she repeated. There was an inexorable demand in her gaze. Mr. Heatherbloom straightened. The ordeal?--it must be met--though that box of Pandora were best left unopened. He could not refuse her anything; this she asked of him was not easy to grant, however.

"Where shall I begin?" he said uncertainly. "You know a great deal. There doesn't seem much worth talking about."

"Begin where we left off--"

"Our boy-and-girl engagement? You broke it. Quite right of you!" She stirred slightly. "It was, at best, but a perfunctory business, half arranged by our parents to keep the millions together--"

"You never blamed me a little, then?" she asked.

"I--blame you?" wonderingly. "You were as far from me as a star. What you thought of me, you told me; it was all right--true stuff. Though it sank in like a blade. I was nothing--worse than nothing. A rich man's son!--a commonplace type. A good fellow some called me at Monte Carlo, Paris, elsewhere." He paused. A moment he seemed another personality--that other one. She saw it anew, caught a glimpse of it like a flash on a mirror; then he seemed to relapse farther back into the shadow. "I really don't want to bore you," he said perfunctorily, raising an uncertain hand to the stray; lock on his forehead.

"You aren't--doing that. Go on." Her eyes were full of questions. "After I saw you that last time"--he nodded--"you disappeared. No one ever heard anything of you; again, or knew what had become of you."

"As no one cared," he said with a short laugh, "what did it matter?"

"You were lost to the world--had vanished completely," she went on. "Sometimes I thought--feared you were dead." Her voice changed.

"Feared?" he repeated. "Ah, yes! You did not want me to go out like that."

"No," she said slowly. "Not like that."

He looked at her comprehendingly; in spite of the bitter passionate repudiation of him, she had been a little in earnest--had cared, in the least, how he went down.

"Why," he said, with a forced smile, "I didn't think you'd bother to give the matter a thought."

"You had some purpose?" she persisted, studying him. "I see--seem to feel it now. It all--you--were incomprehensible. I mean, when I saw you again that first time, in New York, after so long--"

"It was funny, wasn't it?" he said with rather strained lightness. "The Chariot of Concord--What's the Matter with Mother?--the gaping or jibing crowd--then you, going by--"

Her eyelids drooped; he stood now erect and motionless; in spite of the determination to maintain that matter-of-fact pose, visions appeared momentarily in his eyes. The glamour of the instant he had referred to caught him. All he had felt then at the unexpected sight of her--beautiful, far-away--returned to him. She was near now, but still immeasurably distant. He pulled himself together; he hadn't explained very much yet. He was forced to go on; her eyes once more seemed to draw the story from him.

"Yes; I had some purpose in going away like that. The idea came to me at the sanatorium, when I was about 'all in'. They'd managed to keep the drugs and the drink from me, and one day I seemed to wake up and realize I hadn't ever really lived. Just been a tail-ender who had 'gone the pace'. Hadn't even had a beginning. Was it too late to start over again? Probably." His voice came in crisp accents. "But it was a last chance--a feeble one--a straw to the drowning," he laughed. "That sounds absurd to you but I don't know how to explain it better."

"No; it doesn't sound absurd," she said.

"The idea of mine?--how to carry it out? Ways and means were not hard to find. I went to"--he mentioned a name--"an old friend of my father's. He

thought I was a fool," brusquely, "but in the end he approved, or seemed to. Anyhow, I persuaded him to take all my bonds, securities and the rest of (for me) cursed stuff. At the end of a certain time, if I wanted back the few millions I hadn't yet run through, he was to give them to me, minus commissions, wage, etc."

"You mean," said the girl, "that was the way you took to go back to the beginning, as you call it?" Her eyes were like stars. "You practically gave away all your money so as to start by yourself."

"How could I start with it?" he asked, with a faint smile. "Don't you see, Betty"--in a momentary eagerness he forgot himself--"there couldn't be any compromising? Besides, it came to me--you will laugh"--she did not laugh--"that some day, somewhere else, if not here, I'd have to make that beginning, to be something myself. Remember that old Hindu fellow with a red turban who sat on your front lawn, beneath the palms, and had the women gathered around him in a kind of hypnotic state? He said something like that--I thought him an old fakir at the time. He used a lot of flowery language, but I guess, boiled down, it meant start at the bottom of the ladder. Build yourself up, the way my father did," with a certain wistful pride. "You remember him?"

Her head moved. "Fine looking, wasn't he?" ruminatively. "He got there with his hands and brains, and honestly. While I hadn't ever used either. I hope," he broke off, "all this doesn't sound like preaching."

"No," she said.

An instant his gaze lingered on her. "You're sleepy now," he spoke suddenly.

"No, I am not. You found it a little hard, at first?"

"A little. When a man is relaxed and the reaction is on him--" He stopped.

"Tell me--tell me all," she breathed. "Every bit of it, Harry."

His lips twitched. To hear his almost forgotten name spoken again by her! A moment he seemed to waver. Temptation of violet eyes; wonder of the rapt face! Oh, that he might catch her in his arms, claim her anew; this time for all time! But again he mastered himself and went on succinctly, as quickly as possible. Between the lines, however, the girl might read the record of struggles which was very real to her. He had reverted "to the beginning" with poor tools and most scanty experience. And there was that other fight that made it a double fight, the fiercer conflict with self. Hunger, privation, want, which she might divine, though he did not speak of them, became as lesser details. She listened enrapt.

"I guess that's about all," he said at last.

She continued to look at him, his features, clear-cut in the white light. "And you didn't ever really go back--to undo it all?"

"Once I did go back to 'Frisco"--he told her of the relapse with cold candor--"out at heels, and ready to give up. I wanted the millions. They were gone."

"You mean, lost?"

"Yes; he had speculated; was dead. Poor fellow!"

"You say that? And you have never tried to get any of the money back?"

"Fortunately, he died bankrupt," said Mr. Heatherbloom calmly.

"And you failed to show the world he was a--thief?" Something in the word seared her.

"What was the use? He left a wife and children. Besides, he really served me by what the world would call robbing me. I had to continue at the beginning. It was the foot of the ladder, all right," he added.

Her face showed no answering gaiety. "You are going to amount to a great deal some day," she said. "I think very few of us in this world find ourselves," she added slowly.

"Perhaps some don't have to hunt so hard as others," observed Mr. Heatherbloom.

"Don't they?" Her lips wore an odd little smile.

He threw back his shoulders. "Good night, now. You are very tired, I know."

She put out her hand. He took it--how soft and small and cold! The seconds were throbbing hours; he couldn't release it, at once. The little fingers grew warmer--warmer in his palm--their very pulsations seemed throbbing with his. Suddenly he dropped her hand.

"Good night," he said quickly.

He remembered he was nothing to her--that they would soon part for ever.

"Good night," she answered softly.

Then, silence.