

## CHAPTER 20

# DIANA'S NIGHT-WATCH IN THE CHAMBER OF DEATH



He stepped into the room, and thrilled to hear the quiet voice beside the bed: 'Who is it?'

Apologies and excuses were on his tongue. The vibration of those grave tones checked them.

'It is you,' she said.

She sat in shadow, her hands joined on her lap. An unopened book was under the lamp.

He spoke in an underbreath: 'I have just come. I was not sure I should find you here. Pardon.'

'There is a chair.'

He murmured thanks and entered into the stillness, observing her.

'You have been watching... You must be tired.'

'No.'

'An hour was asked, only one.'

'I could not leave him.'

'Watchers are at hand to relieve you.'

'It is better for him to have me.'

The chord of her voice told him of the gulf she had sunk in during the night. The thought of her endurance became a burden.

He let fall his breath for patience, and tapped the floor with his foot.

He feared to discompose her by speaking. The silence grew more fearful, as the very speech of Death between them.

'You came. I thought it right to let you know instantly. I hoped you would come to-morrow.'

'I could not delay.'

'You have been sitting alone here since eleven!'

'I have not found it long.'

'You must want some refreshment ... tea?'

'I need nothing.'

'It can be made ready in a few minutes.'

'I could not eat or drink.'

He tried to brush away the impression of the tomb in the heavily-curtained chamber by thinking of the summer-morn outside; he spoke of it, the rosy sky, the dewy grass, the piping birds. She listened, as one hearing of a quitted sphere.

Their breathing in common was just heard if either drew a deeper breath. At moments his eyes wandered and shut. Alternately in his mind Death had vaster meanings and doubtfuller; Life cowered under the shadow or outshone it. He glanced from her to the figure in the bed, and she seemed swallowed.

He said: 'It is time for you to have rest. You know your room. I will stay till the servants are up.'

She replied: 'No, let this night with him be mine.'

'I am not intruding...?'

'If you wish to remain...'

No traces of weeping were on her face. The lampshade revealed it colourless, and lustreless her eyes. She was robed in black. She held her hands clasped.

'You have not suffered?'

'Oh, no.'

She said it without sighing: nor was her speech mournful, only brief.

'You have seen death before?'

'I sat by my father four nights. I was a girl then. I cried till I had no more tears.'

He felt a burning pressure behind his eyeballs.

'Death is natural,' he said.

'It is natural to the aged. When they die honoured...' She looked where the dead man lay. 'To sit beside the young, cut off from their dear opening life...!' A little shudder swept over her. 'Oh! that!'

'You were very good to come. We must all thank you for fulfilling his wish.'

'He knew it would be my wish.'

Her hands pressed together.

'He lies peacefully!'

'I have raised the lamp on him, and wondered each time. So changeless he lies. But so like a sleep that will wake. We never see peace but in the features of the dead. Will you look? They are beautiful. They have a heavenly sweetness.'

The desire to look was evidently recurrent with her. Dacier rose.

Their eyes fell together on the dead man, as thoughtfully as Death allows to the creatures of sensation.

'And after?' he said in low tones.

'I trust to my Maker,' she replied. 'Do you see a change since he breathed his last?'

'Not any.'

'You were with him?'

'Not in the room. Two minutes later.'

'Who...?'

'My father. His niece, Lady Cathairn.'

'If our lives are lengthened we outlive most of those we would have to close our eyes. He had a dear sister.'

'She died some years back.'

'I helped to comfort him for that loss.'

'He told me you did.'

The lamp was replaced on the table.

'For a moment, when I withdraw the light from him, I feel sadness. As if the light we lend to anything were of value to him now!'

She bowed her head deeply. Dacier left her meditation undisturbed.

The birds on the walls outside were audible, tweeting, chirping.

He went to the window-curtains and tried the shutter-bars. It seemed to him that daylight would be cheerfuller for her. He had a thirst to behold her standing bathed in daylight.

'Shall I open them?' he asked her.

'I would rather the lamp,' she said.

They sat silently until she drew her watch from her girdle. 'My train starts at half-past six. It is a walk of thirty-five minutes to the station. I did it last night in that time.'

'You walked here in the dark alone?'

'There was no fly to be had. The station-master sent one of his porters with me. We had a talk on the road. I like those men.'

Dacier read the hour by the mantelpiece clock. 'If you must really go by the early train, I will drive you.'

'No, I will walk; I prefer it.'

'I will order your breakfast at once.'

He turned on his heel. She stopped him. 'No, I have no taste for eating or drinking.'

'Pray...' said he, in visible distress.

She shook her head. 'I could not. I have twenty minutes longer. I can find my way to the station; it is almost a straight road out of the park-gates.'

His heart swelled with anger at the household for the treatment she had been subjected to, judging by her resolve not to break bread in the house.

They resumed their silent sitting. The intervals for a word to pass between them were long, and the ticking of the time-piece fronting the death-bed ruled the chamber, scarcely varied.

The lamp was raised for the final look, the leave-taking.

Dacier buried his face, thinking many things – the common multitude in insurrection.

‘A servant should be told to come now,’ she said. ‘I have only to put on my bonnet and I am ready.’

‘You will take no...?’

‘Nothing.’

‘It is not too late for a carriage to be ordered.’

‘No – the walk!’

They separated.

He roused the two women in the dressing-room, asleep with heads against the wall. Thence he sped to his own room for hat and overcoat, and a sprinkle of cold water. Descending the stairs, he beheld his companion issuing from the chamber of death. Her lips were shut, her eyelids nervously tremulous.

They were soon in the warm sweet open air, and they walked without an interchange of a syllable through the park into the white hawthorn lane, glad to breathe. Her nostrils took long draughts of air, but of the change of scene she appeared scarcely sensible.

At the park-gates, she said: ‘There is no necessity for your coming.’

His answer was: ‘I think of myself. I gain something every step I walk with you.’

‘To-day is Thursday,’ said she. ‘The funeral is...?’

‘Monday has been fixed. According to his directions, he will lie in the churchyard of his village – not in the family vault.’

‘I know,’ she said hastily. ‘They are privileged who follow him and see the coffin lowered. He spoke of this quiet little resting-place.’

‘Yes, it’s a good end. I do not wonder at his wish for the honour you have done him. I could wish it too. But more living than dead – that is a natural wish.’

‘It is not to be called an honour.’

‘I should feel it so – an honour to me.’

‘It is a friend’s duty. The word is too harsh; it was his friend’s desire. He did not ask it so much as he sanctioned it. For to him what has my sitting beside him been!’

‘He had the prospective happiness.’

‘He knew well that my soul would be with him – as it was last night. But he knew it would be my poor human happiness to see

him with my eyes, touch him with my hand, before he passed from our sight.'

Dacier exclaimed: 'How you can love!'

'Is the village church to be seen?' she asked.

'To the right of those elms; that is the spire. The black spot below is a yew. You love with the whole heart when you love.'

'I love my friends,' she replied.

'You tempt me to envy those who are numbered among them.'

'They are not many.'

'They should be grateful!'

'You have some acquaintance with them all.'

'And an enemy? Had you ever one? Do you know of one?'

'Direct and personal designedly? I think not. We give that title to those who are disinclined to us and add a dash of darker colour to our errors. Foxes have enemies in the dogs; heroines of melodramas have their persecuting villains. I suppose that conditions of life exist where one meets the original complexities. The bad are in every rank. The inveterately malignant I have not found. Circumstances may combine to make a whisper as deadly as a blow, though not of such evil design. Perhaps if we lived at a Court of a magnificent despot we should learn that we are less highly civilized than we imagine ourselves; but that is a fire to the passions, and the extreme is not the perfect test. Our civilization counts positive gains – unless you take the melodrama for the truer picture of us. It is always the most popular with the English. – And look, what a month June is! Yesterday morning I was with Lady Dunstane on her heights, and I feel double the age. He was fond of this wild country. We think it a desert, a blank, whither he has gone, because we will strain to see in the utter dark, and nothing can come of that but the bursting of the eyeballs.'

Dacier assented: 'There's no use in peering beyond the limits.'

'No,' said she; 'the effect is like the explaining of things to a dull head – the finishing stroke to the understanding! Better continue to brood. We get to some unravelment if we are left to our own efforts. I quarrel with no priest of any denomination. That they should quarrel among themselves is comprehensible in their wisdom, for each has the specific. But they show us *their* way of solving the great problem, and we ought to thank them, though one or the other abominate us. You are advised to talk with Lady Dunstane on these themes. She is perpetually in the antechamber of death, and her soul is perennially sunshine. – See the pretty cottage under the laburnum curls! Who lives there?'

'His gamekeeper, Simon Rofe.'

'And what a playground for the children, that bit of common by their garden-palings! and the pond, and the blue hills over the furzes. I hope those people will not be turned out.'

Dacier could not tell. He promised to do his best for them.

'But,' said she, 'you are the lord here now.'

'Not likely to be the tenant. Incomes are wanted to support even small estates.'

'The reason is good for courting the income.'

He disliked the remark; and when she said presently: 'Those wind-mills make the landscape homely,' he rejoined: 'They remind one of our wheeling London gamins round the cab from the station.'

'They remind you,' said she, and smiled at the chance discordant trick he had, remembering occasions when it had crossed her.

'This is homelier than Rovio,' she said; 'quite as nice in its way.'

'You do not gather flowers here.'

'Because my friend has these at her feet.'

'May one petition without a rival, then, for a souvenir?'

'Certainly, if you care to have a common buttercup.'

They reached the station, five minutes in advance of the train. His coming manœuvre was early detected, and she drew from her pocket the little book he had seen lying unopened on the table, and said: 'I shall have two good hours for reading.'

'You will not object? ... I must accompany you to town. Permit it, I beg. You shall not be worried to talk.'

'No; I came alone and return alone.'

'Fasting and unprotected! Are you determined to take away the worst impression of us? Do not refuse me this favour.'

'As to fasting, I could not eat: and unprotected no woman is in England, if she is a third-class traveller. That is my experience of the class; and I shall return among my natural protectors – the most unselfishly chivalrous to women in the whole world.'

He had set his heart on going with her, and he attempted eloquence in pleading, but that exposed him to her humour; he was tripped.

'It is not denied that you belong to the knightly class,' she said; 'and it is not necessary that you should wear armour and plumes to proclaim it; and your appearance would be ample protection from the drunken sailors travelling, you say, on this line; and I may be deplorably mistaken in imagining that I could tame them. But your knightliness is due elsewhere; and I commit myself to the fortune of war. It is a battle for women everywhere; under the most favourable conditions

among my dear common English. I have not my maid with me, or else I should not dare.'

She paid for a third-class ticket, amused by Dacier's look of entreaty and trouble.

'Of course I obey,' he murmured.

'I have the habit of exacting it in matters concerning my independence,' she said; and it arrested some rumbling notions in his head as to a piece of audacity on the starting of the train. They walked up and down the platform till the bell rang and the train came rounding beneath an arch.

'Oh, by the way, may I ask?' – he said: 'was it your article in Whitmonby's journal on a speech of mine last week?'

'The guilty writer is confessed.'

'Let me thank you.'

'Don't. But try to believe it written on public grounds – if the task is not too great.'

'I may call?'

'You will be welcome.'

'To tell you of the funeral – the last of him.'

'Do not fail to come.'

She could have laughed to see him jumping on the steps of the third-class carriages one after another to choose her company for her. In those pre-democratic blissful days before the miry Deluge, the opinion of the requirements of poor English travellers entertained by the Seigneur Directors of the class above them, was that they differed from cattle in stipulating for seats. With the exception of that provision to suit their weakness, the accommodation extended to them resembled pens, and the seats were emphatically seats of penitence, intended to grind the sitter for his mean pittance payment and absence of aspiration to a higher state. Hard angular wood, a low roof, a shabby square of window aloof, demanding of him to quit the seat he insisted on having, if he would indulge in views of the passing scenery, – such was the furniture of dens where a refinement of castigation was practised on villain poverty by denying leathers to the windows, or else buttons to the leathers, so that the windows had either to be up or down, but refused to shelter and freshen simultaneously.

Dacier selected a compartment occupied by two old women, a mother and babe and little maid, and a labouring man. There he installed her, with an eager look that she would not notice.

'You will want the window down,' he said.

She applied to her fellow-travellers for the permission; and struggling

to get the window down, he was irritated to animadvert on 'these carriages' of the benevolent railway Company.

'Do not forget that the wealthy are well treated, or you may be unjust,' said she, to pacify him.

His mouth sharpened its line while he tried arts and energies on the refractory window. She told him to leave it. 'You can't breathe this atmosphere!' he cried, and called to a porter, who did the work, remarking that it was rather stiff.

The door was banged and fastened. Dacier had to hang on the step to see her in the farewell. From the platform he saw the top of her bonnet; and why she should have been guilty of this freak of riding in an unwholesome carriage, tasked his power of guessing. He was too English even to have taken the explanation, for he detested the distinguishing of the races in his country, and could not therefore have comprehended her peculiar tenacity of the sense of injury as long as enthusiasm did not arise to obliterate it. He required a course of lessons in Irish.

Sauntering down the lane, he called at Simon Rofe's cottage, and spoke very kindly to the gamekeeper's wife. That might please Diana. It was all he could do at present.