

The Broad Highway

"Which We Call Life"

(Continued from yesterday.)

CHAPTER XX

Concerning Daemons in General and One in Particular.

In certain old books you shall find strange mention of witches, warlocks, succubae, spirits, demons, and a thousand other powers of darkness, whose names, pronounced with a certain solemnity, and most minute and particular descriptions of witch-marks and the like.

Aforetime, when a man committed some great offence against laws human or divine, he was said to be possessed of a daemon—that is to say, he became the medium and instrument through which the evil power of the devil was wrought; and by which, the devil came to be incarnated in the man, as to exorcise, once and for all, the devil which possessed him.

In these material, common-sense days, we are wont to smile the superstitious at the dark superstitions and the thousand powers of darkness abide with us still, though today they go by different names, for they are not man in this, young, complacent age of ours, but carries within him a power of evil greater or less, according to his intellect. Scratch off the social veneer, lift but a corner of the very decent cloak of our civilization, and behold! there stands the Primal Man in all his old, wild savagery, and with the devil lurking upon his shoulder.

Indeed, today as surely as in the dim past, we are all possessed of a devil, great or small, weaker or stronger as the case may be, a daemon which, though he sometimes seems to slumber, is yet watchful and ever ready to spring up and possess us, to the undoing of ourselves and others.

Thus, as I followed my companion through the wood, I was conscious of a Daemon that ran beside me, leaping and gambolling at my elbow, though I kept my eyes straight before me. Anon, his clucking fingers were upon my arm, and faint I would have shaken him off, but could not; while, as I watched the swing and grace of the little, feminine body before me, from the little foot to the crowning glory of her hair, she seemed a thousand times more beautiful than I had supposed. And I had saved her tonight from what? There had been the fear of worse than death in her eyes, when that step had sounded outside her chamber door. Hereupon, as I walked, I began to wonder if I had not read in the old romances of the gratitude of rescued ladies.

"Truly," said I to myself, "in olden days a lady well knew how to reward her rescuer!"

"Woman is woman—the same today as then—try her, try her!" chuckled the Daemon. And now, as I looked more fully at the Daemon, he seemed to me not a daemon at all, but rather, a jovial companion who nodded, and winked, and nudged me slyly with his elbow. "What are your pretences but to be admired?" said he in my ear; "what are desperate waists for but to be pressed; and as for a kiss or two in a dark wood, with no one to spy—they like it, you do, they like it!"

So we traversed the alleys of the wood, now in shadow, now in moonlight, the Lady, the Daemon, and I, and always the perfume of hidden flowers seemed sweeter and stronger, the gleam of her hair and the sway of her body the more alluring, and always the voice at my ear whispered: "Try her, you do, try her."

At last, being come to a broad, grassy glade, the lady paused, and, standing in the full radiance of the dying moon, looked up at me with a smile on her red lips.

"They can never find us now," she said.

"No, they can never find us now," I repeated, while the Daemon at my elbow chuckled again.

"And—oh, sir I can never, never thank you," she began.

"Don't," said I, not looking at her; "don't thank me till we are out of the wood."

"I think," she went on slowly, "that you can guess from what you saved me, and can understand something of my gratitude, for I can never express it all."

"Indeed," said I, "indeed you over-estimate my service."

"You risked your life for me, sir," said she, her eyes glistening, "surely my thanks are due to you for that. And with a swift, impulsive gesture, she stretched out her hands to me. For a brief moment I hesitated, then seized them, and drew her close. But, even as I stooped above her, she repulsed me desperately; her bosomed hair brushed my eyes and lips—blind, maddened me; my last fell off, and all at once her struggles ceased.

"Sir Maurice Vibart!" she panted, and I saw a helpless terror in her face. But the Daemon's jovial voice chuckled in my ear:

"Ho, Peter Vibart, act up to your cousin's reputation; who's to know the difference?" My arms tightened about her, then I loosed her suddenly, and, turning, smote my clenched fist against a tree; which done, I stooped and picked up my hat and blackthorn staff.

"Madam," said I, looking down upon my bleeding knuckles, "I am not Sir Maurice Vibart. It seems my fate to be mistaken for him wherever I go. My name is Peter, plain and unvarnished, and I am very humbly your servant." Now as I spoke, it seemed that the Daemon, no longer the jovial companion, was himself again, horns, hoofs, and tail—any, indeed, he seemed a thousand times more foul and

hideous than before, as he mouthed and jibed at me in baffled fury; wherefore, I smiled and turned my back upon him.

"Come," said I, extending my hand to the trembling girl, "let us get out of these dismal woods." For a space she hesitated, looking up at me beneath her lashes, then reached out, and laid her fingers in mine; and, as we turned away, I knew that the Daemon had cast himself upon the ground and was tearing at the grass in a paroxysm of rage and bafflement.

"It is strange," said I, after we had gone some little distance, "very strange that you should only have discovered this resemblance here, and now, for surely you saw my face plainly enough at the inn."

"No; you see, I hardly looked at you."

"And now that you do look at me, am I so very much like Maurice?"

"Not now," she answered, shaking her head, "for though you are of his height, and though your features are much the same as his, your expression is different. But a moment ago—when your hat fell off—"

"Yes!" said I.

"Your expression—your face looked 'demoniac'!" I suggested.

"Yes," she answered.

"Yes!" said I.

"So we went upon our way, not pausing until we had left the Daemon and the dark woods behind us. Then I looked from the beauty of the sweet, pure earth to the beauty of her who stood beside me, and I saw that her glance rested upon the broken knuckles of my right hand. Meeting my eyes, her own drooped, and a flush crept into her cheeks, and though of course she could not have seen the Daemon, yet I think that she understood.

CHAPTER XXI

"Journeys End in Lovers' Meetings"

The moon was fast sinking below the treelines to our left, what time we reached a road, or rather cart-track that wound away up a hill. Faint and far a church clock slowly chimed the hour of three, the solemn notes coming sweet and silvery with distance.

"What chimed are those?" I inquired.

"Crabbrook Church."

"Is it far Crabbrook?"

"One mile this way, but two by the road yonder."

"You seem very well acquainted with these parts," said I.

"I have lived here all my life; those are the Crabbourne Woods over there."

"Crabbourne Woods?" said I.

"Part of the Serion estates," she continued; "Crabbourne village lies to the right, beyond."

"The Lady Sophia Serion of Crabbourne?" said I thoughtfully.

"My nearest friend," nodded my companion.

"They say she is very handsome," said I.

"Then they speak the truth, sir."

"She has been described to me," I went on, "as a Peach, a Goddess, and a Plum; which should you consider the most proper term?"

"My companion shot an arch glance at me from the corners of her eyes, and I saw a dimple come and go, beside the curve of her mouth.

"Goddess, to be sure," said she; "peaches have such rough skins, and plums are apt to be sticky."

"And goddesses," I added, "were all very well upon Olympus, but in this matter-of-fact age, must be sadly out of place. Speaking for myself—"

"Have you ever seen this particular Goddess?" inquired my companion.

"Never."

"Then wait until you have, sir."

The moon was down now, yet the summer sky was wonderfully luminous, and in the east I almost fancied I could detect the first faint gleam of day. And after we had traversed some distance in silence, my companion suddenly spoke, but without looking at me.

"You have never once asked who I am," she said, almost reproachfully I thought, "nor how I came to be shut up in a place—without such a man."

"Why as to that?" I answered, "I make it a general rule to avoid awkward subjects when I can, and never to ask questions that it will be difficult to answer."

"I should find not the least difficulty in answering either," said she.

"Besides," I continued, "it is no affair of mine, after all."

"Oh!" said she, turning away from me; and then, very slowly: "No, I suppose not."

"Certainly not," I added; "how should it be?"

"By how indeed!" said she, over her shoulder. And then I saw that she was angry, and wondered.

"And yet," I went on, after a lapse of silence, "I think I could have answered both questions the moment I saw you at your easement."

"Oh!" said she—this time in a tone of surprise, and her anger all gone again, for I saw that she was smiling; and again I wondered.

"Yes," I nodded.

"Then," said she, seeing I was silent, "whom do you suppose me?"

"You are, to the best of my belief, the Lady Helen Dunstan." My companion stood still, and regarded me for a moment in wide-eyed astonishment.

"Yes," I nodded.

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