

## DAME INOWSLAD



YCAMORES and beeches surrounded the inn ; elders, still green-flowered, leaned over the grass-grown roads. The belt of sward was white with lady-smocks, but in the damp hollows marsh-marigolds radiated essential sunlight. The blackbirds sang, and loudly, yet without the true strain of mirth : sang like blackbirds that must sing, but of rifled nests. Even the grasshoppers had some trouble : never had they chirped so pathetically before.

On the green the gilded figure of a bull hung from two uprights ; it swung from side to side in the light breeze. The copper bell on a twisted pole hard by was green with mould : a-swing from it was a rusty chain ; it had been used in the old posting days, and many a yeoman had haled himself into his saddle from the worn mounting-block beside it.

For the inn itself, it was vast and rambling, dwarfed by the towering trees. For miles in

every direction lay the old forest of Gardomwood, a relic of primeval woodland, rich in glades and brakes, in streamlets and mizzies: hazy in the clearings, where sheer-legs, like the trivets of witches' caldrons, and tents and blue-smoking heaps told of charcoal-burners and their ever-shifting trade.

The Golden Bull with its beautiful precincts took me back to that fading Arcady whose shepherdesses and swains felt the end of the joy-time coming. It was utterly sad; but I was caught in the meshes of its melancholy, and for the while could not escape. 'Twilight fell, and I ceased from exploring, and went indoors. In the parlour was a great square piano. Its music, while acidly discordant, was yet plaintive with the curious speech such old things often own. I played a few Robin Hood ballads—of the Outlaw and Little John, of the Bishop of Hereford and Robin's pleasing escape. Then the hostess entered with a great Nottingham jar full of white lilac. She set this down between the fire-dogs, and stood leaning one hand on a chair-back and listening to the music. When I stopped she sighed heavily: I left the piano, and offered her a chair. She was middle-aged and deformed; her shoulders were humped, her face was shrivelled, but she had large grey eyes and a wistful smile.

‘I thank you, sir,’ she said. ‘Twas the music drew me in. Nobody’s played since last summer, when Sir Jake Inowslad stayed here. His taste was sonatas and fugues—things pretty enow, but only pleasing at the time. Give me a melody that I can catch—almost grasp in my hand so to speak.’

‘Do you play?’ I asked, half-hoping to hear some air she had loved in her youth.

‘No, I cannot play. I was still-room maid at Melbrook Abbey, so I never had opportunity.’

As she spoke, a girl came in with the snuffer-tray and candles. She was pale and tall and of a tempting shape. Beautiful she was not, yet the sad strangeness of her face impressed me more than great beauty would have done. Her eyes were like the other woman’s, but clearer and more expressive; her lips were quaintly arched; long yellow hair hung down her back. She seemed, although she walked erect, to be recovering from some violent illness. When she had gone the hostess spoke again. ‘My niece is not strong,’ she said, laying an unnecessary emphasis on the word *niece*. ‘The air does not suit her.’

‘Was not she bred in the country?’ I inquired.

‘Ah, no! She is not without money—her father endowed her well. Until two years back she was at the convent of the Sisters of Saint

Vincent de Paul for her education. 'Tis in the hill-country, and I think that coming to the flatness of Gardomwood has done her harm.'

The girl came in again: this time I noted her grace of movement; it had something of the wearied goddess. 'Aunt,' she said quietly, 'I wish to go into the woods—you can spare me? All I had to do is done; the women are sewing in the kitchen.' She went to the further end of the room, where a cloak of rose-coloured silk hung, ermine-lined, from a nail in the panelling. She donned it at her leisure; her long and narrow hands were of a perfect colour. She tied the broad ribands of the collar; she lighted two candles that hung before a tarnished mirror, and gazed at her shadow; then, her lips moving silently, she left the room.

'Ever the same,' the elder woman said. 'Night after night does she leave the house and travel about like an aimless thing. Come back, Dinah,' she called, 'come back.' But the thin voice went wavering through the empty passages unanswered. So the hostess rose and with a half-apologetic 'Good-night,' left me alone. I sat down in the deep recess of the window behind a heavy curtain. A copy of Denis Diderot's *Religieuse* lay on the little table. I took it up, and was soon engrossed in it: for of all books this is the most fascinating, the most disappointing, the

most grim. A light came glimmering at the end of the vista before me : it grew and grew, and the moon uplifted herself waist-high above the trees. And when I had watched her thus far, I returned to my nun and reached page twenty-two of the second volume, where I read the following sentence : 'After a few flourishes she played some things, foolish, wild, and incoherent as her own ideas, but through all the defects of her execution I saw she had a touch infinitely superior to mine.' Then in the shaded window-seat I fell asleep. . . .

The striking of a tall clock near the hearth awakened me : I had slept till midnight. The candles had been removed from the table to the piano ; those in the girandole had guttered out or been extinguished. A young man sat at the piano on the embroidered stool. His back was towards me ; I saw nothing but high, narrow shoulders and a dome-shaped head of dishevelled black hair plentifully besprinkled with grey. From the road outside came a noise of horses whinnying and plunging. I looked out, and there was a lumbering coach drawn by four stallions which, black in daylight, shone now like burnished steel.

The would-be musician turned and showed me a long painful face with glistening eyes and a brow ridged upward like a ruined stair. It was

a face of intense eagerness: the eagerness of a man experimenting and praying for a result whereon his life depends. Without any prelude he played a dance of ghosts in an old ball-room: ghosts of men and women that moved in lavoltas and sarabands; ghosts that laughed at Susanna in the tapestry; ghosts that loved and hated. When the last chord had sent them crowding to their graves he turned and listened for a foot-step. None came. He lifted a leather case from the side of the stool and, unfastening its clasps, took out a necklace which glistened in the candle-light like a fairy shower of rain and snow. 'Twas of table diamonds and margarites, the gems as big as filberts. He spread it across the wires, and after an instant's reflection began to play. The carcanet rattled and jangled as he went: it was as an advancing host of cymbal-women. When he listened again, great tears oozed from his eyes. He took up the jewel and played a melody vapid at first, but so subtle in its repetitions that none might doubt its meaning: thus and not otherwise would sound a lyke-wake sung in a worn voice after a night of singing. And whilst he played, the door opened silently, and I saw Dinah, there in her nightgown, holding the posts with her hands. She took one swift glance, then disappeared again in the darkness, and came back carrying in her arms a bundle swathed in pure

linen and strongly redolent of aromatic herbs. Holding this to her breast, she approached the man. Her shadow fell across the keys, and he lifted his head. From both came a long murmur : his of love and joy and protection, hers of agony. He rose and would have clasped her, but she drew back and placed her burden in his outstretched hands.

‘It is the child,’ she said. ‘Three months ago I gave birth to her, none knew save myself. . . . She was all that remained of you : all that I had, and I dared not part with her. . . . But now—now that I have seen you again—take her away—leave me—leave me in peace.’

‘Dinah,’ he said proudly, ‘listen to me.’

‘Nay,’ she whispered, ‘not again. If I listen I may forget your wickedness ; I might be weak again. Leave me, Jake.’

‘Dinah, you must hear me. Why, out of all the love you held and hold for me, can you condemn ? When I left you I fell mad ; for the year I have been mad, and only yesterday did they set me loose. See, I have brought you all the diamonds ; to-morrow you will be Dame Inowslad.’ And he laid the dead thing on a table, and caught the mother to his bosom. Her figure was shaken with sobs.

‘Oh,’ she cried, ‘it has been hard ; but my trial has brought the true guerdon of happiness.’

Only once have I missed seeing the place where you promised to meet me—the place where you said you loved me; and that was on the night of my lonely travailing.’

Outside the horses plunged and snorted: a shrunken postillion swaying at the neck of the off-leader. In the hollows of the road lay sheets of mist, and the moonlight turned them into floods. A long train of startled owls left the hollow sycamores and passed hooting . . . hooting . . . down the glade.

‘Let us go,’ Sir Jake said; ‘by morning light we shall be in sight of Cammere, where Heaven grant us a happy time;—a year of joy for each week of pain. Do not wait to dress; rich robes and linen are inside the coach; I have brought many of my mother’s gowns.’

Dinah extricated herself from his embrace, and went to find her cloak. During her absence a strange and terrible look came into Inowslad’s face and he smote his forehead. He smiled at her re-appearing. ‘Dinah,’ he said, looking downwards, so that she might not see his eyes, ‘Dinah, I am so happy that I can scarce see. Lead me from the house.’

He took up the dead little one in his right arm, and carried it as believers carry relics. The outer door closed softly; they descended the mossgrown steps, and entered the coach. The



horses leaped forward, half drowning the sound of a chuckle. A glint of the moon pierced the coach windows, and I saw a brown hand, convulsed and violent, griping a long white throat.