CHAPTER XXXI.

SHADOWS OF DEATH.

One evening we all assembled to see the duchess have her first ride on Motrarer. Danger there was none, but the boys were proud of their present, and their parents, overjoyed at everything, from the idea that caused it, when the gray foal jumped into the oats, to the first ride and final acts of donation. Only the boys and Winda had ever ridden the gray. Neither Winda nor any of us would ever forget his ride, and no one but the duchess, or some one by her special permission, was ever to ride the gray again.

My wife and the two boys were to accompany the duchess. The stable door opened and Motrarer came out, gambolling and neighing in the exuberant joy of perfect, physical health. Still too fat for hard work, his condition was perfect to show off his great beauty. The glossy skin, marked evenly with dark dapples, was set off by a flowing mane and tail; while the thick arched stallion neck made the small head look even smaller than it was. After moving round the yard, he came up to the other horses, when Vernon, taking the reins and wither in his left hand, caught his mother's foot in his right, and so enabled her to spring into the saddle.

Motrarer turned and sniffed suspiciously at the habit, then, seeing the other horses were mounted, sprang away to get a good start; for though he was always ready to race any horse, he always took every advantage he could by getting away first and taking short cuts; two and two, the women leading, the horses disappeared.

Motrarer, giving to the curb, held his head to his breast, and with his tail arched, and an exuberant show of fretting energy, carefully kept the lead.

Mounting the duke's electro-car, we followed, and overtook them as they were entering a racing paddock, on the course of which—a two mile oval—the duchess and my wife, were to give their horses a gallop.
"If you take the car to the road, father, you will see the gallop best," said Vernon.

"Cora, be careful," said the duke, anxious for his wife's safety. "Motraver and yourself seem both in a rash mood."

"To hear is to obey, my lord and husband," laughed the duchess.

Her cheeks were flushed, and in her tightly-fitting habit she looked as young and far handsomer than when she was Cora Novel.

"Be very careful, boys," the duke called out, as we turned and started to our point of vantage; turning to me, he said: "Our queens are girls still, Frank, when there is any excitement to make them forget they are wives and mothers."

We were separated from the oval by about half-a-mile of forest land strewn with great trees, which were being cut up for firewood.

My wife and Novel first took their horses for a mile canter and a mile gallop; Motraver meanwhile prancing restlessly on the curb, as he watched them.

One of the little girls waved a handkerchief, and her mother replied by waving hers; the gray's attention being thus taken from the other horses, he looked up and neighed.

"Motraver sees us, father," called out the child gleefully.

Taking a post-horn, I blew a call on it, and now all the horses looked up, and saw us. Before long, I was bitterly sorry they did. The four riders were together, and the duchess, evidently in answer to a suggestion of Vernon's, tapped her horse on the inner side of the fore-leg with her whip, which caused him to go down on his knees, when she got off and let him rise. After caressing him she brought him on his knees in a similar manner, and mounting him let him rise.

"My boy," said the duke, proudly, "loves his mother with a love that is more than filial, for it is paternal in its care." The boy and his brother, following their father's example, made a pet of their mother, for whom they gathered everything they thought either very beautiful or excellent.

"The duchess," I laughed, "does not need a horse to go on his knees for her to mount."

"No," replied the duke; "but Vernon likes to get his mother a horse such as no one else had, and she loves these proofs of his thoughtfulness, which I regard as exercise for their ingenuity and industry."

My wife and Novel cantered round to us, and Vernon and his mother commenced to gallop round the course, Motraver, hard held, keeping well in the lead; as they turned into a side of the oval directly facing us she said something to Vernon, who extended his horse, and a race commenced. The gray was soon passed by Vernon's fleeter steed. Elated—everyone seemed excited—with the sunshine and galloping, I again blew the horn
just as the horses approached the turn leading home, and away from us, and Novel's horse neighed to his galloping companions. Vernon's horse took no notice, but Motrarer looked up and made a short cut directly towards us; jumping the fence into the paddock, he took the fallen logs almost in his mighty stride. Right between us and him lay a fallen giant forest king, the top of its great bare trunk over five feet from the ground. On came Motrarer, too eager to notice that Vernon's horse had discontinued the race.

"God protect her," muttered the duke.

By making a short curve the tree could be avoided; they would surely not be so mad as to try and jump it. The horse seemed coming right at it. For a moment he seemed suspended in the air—he was over, and rushing panting on towards us. In a few seconds the fence was leaped, but Motrarer, foamed, flecked and triumphant, stood beside us. Looking back, he winnowed to the horse that Vernon rode, which came cantering up from the course.

"Cora, you are very rash. You quite frightened me," said the duke, almost scoldingly.

"Dear, I am sorry," replied the duchess gently; "I couldn't let my horse be beaten. I am never rash except when my husband and boys are with me."

"Bravo, mother," cried Vernon, riding up. "I acknowledge defeat, though I entered for a flat race, not a steeplechase."

"It was Motrarer's idea, and I let him go, as I approved of it."

"And of him?" asked Vernon.

"I do not think there ever was a horse to compare to him, or sons like mine," said the duchess proudly.

"Then, mother dear, keep him only for yourself, till you tire of him, and take him out whenever you feel inclined."

"I will always keep him for myself, my own dear boys, and shall take him out whenever the sun shines and I can get anyone to come with me."

"Either father, or Novel, or I, will be with you whenever you ride Motrarer, mother."

"Always, Vernon."

"Always," said the lad, and the father and Novel repeated the "always" for themselves.

That any power in earth or heaven would prevent them from keeping their word, the duchess would never believe, and other powers were ineffectual with them. As we returned, our cavalcade was led by the great gray, who, foam-speckled, seemed to want the whole road for himself.

One evening from the upper verandah we—the duke and duchess, Mary, and I—watched the boys with their Roda assistants building a large toy house for their sisters, with wooden bricks, and miniature doors and windows. The Rodas had
become obedient and docile, and seemed quite to love their young employers, though they were still able to understand little of any language but their own.

Vernon was directing the erection of the building principally by gesture. Novel sat with paper and pencil elaborating Vernon's design, and calculating if there was sufficient material to finish it, while the little girls sat round admiringly.

The duke and my wife were discussing the complete subjection of the Rodas.

"At present it is impracticable," said the duke; "but Vernon will have no difficulty in doing it in another ten or fifteen years."

"Why can you not attempt it yourself at once?" I asked; "or at the latest in another five or ten?"

"Because," said the duke, thoughtfully, "the country is too fully occupied to be disturbed by any large new scheme. The Rodas are being improved, and made ready for Vernon's conquest."

My wife smiled, and asked, "Duke, will you tell me your full scheme for Vernon?"

"For Vernon and Novel," he answered, too busy with his thoughts to notice her smiles. "I do not think they will work apart. When I am dead and gone, I want them to extend Novel as a basis from which to make the whole world wise and happy. Their first task will be to conquer the Rodas, after which they will have the whole of the land beyond the ice to work on, by the time they have that inhabited by a perfect people, they will be old, and must bequeath to their sons—they will have sons by then—the task of completing my work, or handing the completion of it to their sons again."

"Notice, Mary," said the duchess, "we are discussing two unborn generations."

"But what is the completion of your work?" queried Mary persistently. "I can guess it, but would like to hear it from your own lips."

"It is," said the duke, whose active, plotting brain and vivid imagination were busily working, and reflecting their actions on his mobile face, "it is simply to make the whole world wise, and to banish disease and folly. This I have commenced, and shall see finished by my sons, and their sons, from the state in which I shall exist when I cease this life. I have commenced the edifice, which my descendants shall complete."

"Nothing is impossible to my husband," said the duchess in that reverential tone in which some people speak of the Almighty. "See what he has done, and then you will believe that he will do what he says."

"I hope he will," said my wife, impressed by Cora's tone; "but I think in his projects for the future he has built a tower of Babel."

"Look," said the duchess, "at the house the boys have built."
Vernon and Novel had nearly finished the building. The little girls moved about admiring the edifice from different points of view, while the boys between them were crowning their handiwork with a pretentious steeple. The boys now stepped back to see the effect of the structure. Calling to Winda, they by word and gesture directed him to move the tower a little to one side, to do which he got a ladder. Energetically the boys directed Winda, but he put the ladder up insecurely, so that just as he reached the tower, to move it, the ladder slipped, and the whole structure collapsed, and came down, with Winda on the top of it. The Roda rose none the worse for his fall, while the boys laughed good-naturedly, and the little girls merrily clapped their hands at the unforeseen turn things had taken. My wife turned to the duke,—

"Is it a prophecy?" she asked, awe-stricken; "the boys have built a tower of Babel."

The seal-hunting season had come, during which periodically expeditions went out from Undara to capture the seal and walrus, which now came out on the ice in great numbers. Last year the duke had taken the boys, who were this year to go alone. For about a month the seal were killed and their skin and blubber sent to the nearest factory for treatment. Fish of all sorts were caught in great numbers, to feed the young and the mother seals; for only the males and a very few females were killed, and so the supply kept up year after year.

The young Rodas were to go as body-guard to the boys, who were industriously instructing them in manifold duties. They were equipped with tent, gas-gun, spears, hunting-knives, and a number of luxuries unusual in the hunting-field, which were more for the boys' friends than themselves, for their tent was always a headquarters, made delightful by the duke's wealth and the charming manner of its possessors. Finally, the electro-car was loaded, and the careful preparations complete, after which the dogs were put in, and, lastly, a double basket containing eight of the carrier gulls, one of which was to be despatched every morning with a letter, written alternately by the boys the night before. After saying good-bye to everyone, each lad kissed his mother and mounted the electro-car, which sped away in the distance, under the control of Vernon, and was soon lost to sight. Every member of the household, and a number of the neighbours, had gathered to say good-bye to the bright boys who had left us, as every heart beat for the sons of the man who had done so much for his country.

"We will have their letters, dear, to cheer us up," said the duke to his wife, as he drew her hand through his arm.

"Yes," she said simply, her heart too full for speech, and her great eyes suffused with tears.

Next day, at noon, the duke and I watched for the gull from
the tower of Quindira. Presently the duchess and Mary joined us, the former looking rather anxious.

"The gull is very late, dear," she said to her husband.

"They would probably be busy till late," answered the duke with affected carelessness, "and leave the letter to be finished in the morning, which would cause a delay in starting the gull."

"Is there no fear of the gull being shot, or caught by some bird of prey?" I asked.

"No one ever shoots them," answered Duke Vernon, "and they fly too fast to be caught by any bird of prey. There is only one swifter bird, the frigate bird, which the Rodas call the 'Cheebra,' and it would not molest the carrier."

At last we saw a speck in the distance. Rapidly it approached. In a few seconds we could see by its flight that it was a gull; then it slackened its arrow-like course, and flew into the gull-house, where it was caught and brought to us. A pretty bird with wings, tail, and general shape like a swallow, but nearly as large as a common duck. The neck black; the back and upper part of the wings thickly speckled; and the other plumage white. Two pieces of thin strong paper were wrapped round, and fastened to two feathers under and on either side of the tail. These being loosened, the bird was given a plateful of pieces of raw fish, which it greedily swallowed, raising its wing the while, and angrily pecking at those who surrounded it. When it had gorged itself to the full, it fluttered down to the river, and swam about in an evident state of satisfaction. The duchess smoothed out the manuscript, and began to read—

"DEAR MOTHER,—We have had a splendid trip. We were too tired to write last night after we had made everything snug, so I am busy writing now—morning eight o'clock. We intended to get up early, but did not do so. I should have sent you a gull and a line to say 'all well,' but I knew you would not be anxious"—

["But I was," said the duchess.]—"and I was afraid of using up all the carriers, for we will have a lot of letters to send."—["He is a good, thoughtful boy, dear," said my wife.]—"After our start we went along at a moderate pace till we got to the depot, when we heard that the other sleigh had gone ahead, so we determined to get to the seal ponds first. To do this we decided to go to the first outpost, get power there, and thence on; this would enable us to travel full speed the whole distance, and much more, make up for the twelve miles we would have to go out of our way. While we reduced our load of everything we could do without, till it came on next day, we sent on a fully charged sleigh, and filled our own chock full of power. We used all despatch, and started away at a tremendous rate over the snow"—

"I am afraid they are rather rash," said the duchess.

"No danger, I can assure you," laughed the duke in great
good humour, "and the only way they could win the race, our clever boys?"—

"When we overtook the sleigh, taking forward the spare power, we had gone a fifth of the way to the outpost. Receiving again our full complement of power, we left the helping sleigh, and sped away with tremendous rapidity. When about the third of the way Novel saw two silver foxes, which we decided to get for Mary Vero"—["The dear, kind boys," said my wife.]—"so we started after them. We covered up the dogs to keep them quiet, and soon overtook and electrocuted the first, after which we started after the other, who had got a long way off. I foolishly threw the dead fox into the car instead of coming back for him. Directly the dogs got scent of him, they yelled and tried to get loose, giving the Rodas and Novel a hard time to keep them from breaking out. Just as I approached the fox, Burgen broke away, but the fox was secure and killed before he came up. Off we went again, and reached the outpost without further incident, though we saw some wolves which Novel prevented me chasing."

"That boy's caution will always be useful to his brother," said the duke.

"They were surprised to see us at the fort, where all was well. They gave us fresh power, and off we went, as fast as the car could go. On our journey we passed a number of seals, so the chances are the season will be a good one; this they also think at the station. Reaching our journey's end, we found the other sleighs had not only not arrived, but were not even in sight. A snow hut had been built for us according to the design we sent, and we at once proceeded to erect our canvas frame tent inside it. To do this and put the car and its contents safely away in their proper places took us till nearly midnight; everyone working his hardest; after which we all went to bed"—["Our boys have a splendid energy," said the duke, approvingly.]—"In the morning we intended to wake up early, but did not do so, hence the delay in your receiving this letter. The fishing has commenced: it has been very good, and promises well for the season."

The letter here ended with affectionate messages for the people of Quindira, and the signature "Vernon Dreman"—a signature that was a talisman mightier than the sword of the greatest conqueror in history; for other conquerors have always, more or less, used force, while Duke Dreman's power was strength and justice, which so appealed to the hearts of the people, that they had become content to take what he advocated on trust, knowing they would be shown its wisdom in good time. The women talked of the boys, and the prospect of their hunting, which was both a matter of pleasure and profit; for no animal, not obnoxious to man's interest, was ever killed except to be used. The duke and I pursued our usual duties and pleasures.
Earlier the next day, the carrier-gull arrived with the letter from Novel, whose turn it was to write.

"DEAR MOTHER,—Do not be alarmed if the gull arrives late in the future, as we have decided to write our letters, as a rule, first thing in the morning, instead of at night, as we are so tired when night comes, that we want to go to bed. We have had a splendid day; the seal are numerous, and in splendid condition, and one in three of the females have been marked off for killing. There are a number of walrus and sea-lions, but we have not yet received permission to kill them. We have lots of power here, so Vernon took us out in the evening to see if we could get some silver foxes; we went a long way and the hound killed several wolves, and some hares, but though we found foxes’ footprints, we saw none. Coming home, we met a sleigh returning with a young polar bear."

I looked at the duke. No one derided his undefined horror of the polar bear more than he did, but he could neither shake it off, nor account for it, as one often can for such presentiments. The house was littered with their beautiful white skins, which numbers of his friends had sent as presents; for his apathy was known. His face looked pale and nervous.

"I hope the boys will not be rash," he said.

"I think they are a match for any number of bears, unless they are taken unprepared, which is hardly possible."

"It was a beautiful little animal; fat and round, its long, pure white hair, making it look an animated ball of snow. Its temper, however, was bad, and it snapped at people without method, sometimes amicable, and sometimes cross. The men who had it said they had found it asleep, and taken it in its mother’s absence, but that its cries brought her back, and they left her in the distance rushing after them."

"Extremely foolish of them," said the duke; "if they wanted the cub they should have killed the mother."

"They said they would have killed her, had they had time to take her skin, but as they were hurried, they left her till their return."

"Extremely foolish," repeated the duke, angrily; "they should have left the cub till their return, if they were so hurried as they say."

"You can see the cub at the Zoological Gardens if you go, and it is worth your while to do so."

"We certainly will go, shall we not, Cora?" asked my wife.

"Yes, dear," answered the mother.

"Vernon has developed a taste for cooking, that makes him a perfect treasure. We had some men to supper last night, and gave them quite a feast. The Rodas are very slow in coming to our ways of cleanliness; when I spoke to Winda, seriously, he asked, ‘If meat clean, why it make plate dirty?’ alluding to our
changing our plates after each course, and I was forced to admit
that after all it is principally prejudice that made us do so. Tell
Mary Vero, that to-morrow evening we will again try and get
her some fox-skins."

This letter, like the last, ended with affectionate messages for
the people of Quindira, and concluded with the signature, "Novel
Dreeman."

In the evening we sat supper, chatting merrily. The duke,
after his momentary uneasiness from the news of the bears, was
unusually vivacious and brilliant, while the rest of us, amused by
his conversation, were in our happiest moods. The summer evening
was warm and balmy with the scent of flowers, so we lingered
lazily over our dessert. The large opened windows showed the
garden almost within reach of our hands. The quiet of evening
had soothed us all to stillness, which suddenly—without any
warning—was broken by a piercing shriek, that went to our hearts
like the thrust of a knife. Duke Dreman started up, white to the
lips, and in a tone of horror gasped, "That bear, that cursed bear!"
We listened! A hurrying of footsteps came along the hall. The
door was thrown open, and one of the duchess's assistants rushed
in, white and speechless, carrying in her arms a blood-stained gull.
The duke rose and took the bird. On its back was a cross marked
with blood, and its white breast was crimson; smeared as with a
bloody hand.

"Where did you get the bird?" asked the terrified father.
"Vernon—Novel—their bird—" gasped the maid, horror-
stricken.

Amongst the others who had come into the room was an old
woman, who had acted as nurse to each of the children in turn;
stepping forward, she now said quietly, with the calmness of
despair,—

"The gull just flew in, and we found it in its present blood-
stained state. It has no letter or message, though it must have
come from our boys, for it is one of those they took with them."
The duke staggered, his face was ghastly.
"Frank," he gasped, his voice hoarse and harsh, "something
dreadful has happened to our boys. It is those cursed bears."
"Damn them! damn them!" he laughed a loud harsh laugh,
that made me shudder. His wife, who till now was silent, her
eyes opened wide with fear, went over to him and threw her
arms round his neck and kissed him; once, twice, quickly in jerks.
"My husband, my hero," she gasped: "nothing may have
happened. Nothing can have happened, or the gull would have
brought a message. Some animals have attacked the gulls and
this one only has escaped."
The man's face was fixed. He seemed not to hear.
"Kiss me, my dear, kiss me, Vernon, Vernon." Her voice rose
almost to a shriek. "My darling, do not look like that."
He put his arm round his wife and kissed her. Her head fell forward. She had fainted. He put her down, and Mary sprinkled her face with water.

Turning to the gardener, who had entered with the others, he said,—

"Luo, get the electro-car ready. Charge it, and pack some food and brandy. Do this quickly, but first send Ovy to telegram to the depot, and tell them to have an electro-car ready for me, and to send out one so that I can get fresh power half-way. I must go to our boys to-night."

The old man left, and the duke, who had now regained his composure, turned to his wife.

In a little while she opened her eyes, and was able to take a stimulant.

"Frank," he said, "you will come with me. Mary, look after my darling. Cora, my dear love, hope for the best."

The woman put her arms round her husband's neck.

"My husband, remember if anything has happened, that you must still live for me and the children." Her wild, pale face looked into his, which was fixed and white: "My dear, I fear for you. Be wise. They are mine as well as yours. You have always been my support, be brave now, my darling, be brave." And breaking into sobs, she wept on his breast. He put her down gently; kissed her once, and then we went out to the car. Everything was ready. We took our seats, and, as we passed into the quiet night, the old gardener called after us,—

"God be good to you, Duke Vernon, for you are a merciful man, and a just. God be with you."