CHAPTER XXXII.

DEATH.

RAPIDLY and noiselessly we left Quindira behind us, and passed into the still night.

Were ever men before on such a journey? The boys I hoped to find asleep and well, but then . . . the blood. The awful suspense. The boys; the brave kind boys might be cold and dead. And yet the houses we passed were alight, and merry with the sound of happy voices. On and on, we sped. Once I spoke to Vernon, my friend, true and brave; strong and kind. The old man's words echoed in my ears: "God be good to you, Duke Vernon, for you are a merciful man and a just." When I spoke, he put his hand on my shoulder.

"Frank, let us hope for the best. But always, Frank, think of her, and shield her from harm. God be good to her, and to you and yours, as you treat her."

"Amen, Amen," I said.

We had no need of words. Words are but wind. Actions alone are worthy for men. Till we saw the boys, well and happy or—God be merciful—we were better silent; then we would have much to do. At last through the shadows, and past the happy people, we came to the depot. An electro-car stood ready.

"Another car will meet you, when you have gone half your journey, and give you fresh power, so that you can go full speed all the way," said the manager.

"Thank you," said the duke quietly.

"Do not fear, Duke Dreman, no harm can come to them. Everyone loves them for their own sake, and for yours. No man in Undara but would shield and help them," said the man kindly, but with ill-concealed anxiety, and continued reverentially, "God guard them also. I hope they are well."

Again we sped swiftly into the darkness, on—and on—in the stillness of the night. Presently we came to the snow, and our way was brighter. Overhead, the stars in myriads gleamed glistening in a clear dome of blue. We seemed a moving dot in a pathless tract of white. On we sped with a lightning rapidity towards a planet that came no nearer. The snow flashed past
us on our flying way, and yet we seemed not to move. The
greatness of nature impressed me. My grief-stricken friend must
have felt the same thing.

"Frank," it was only the second time he had spoken to me,
"I think I should have asked the Almighty power to take my
boys into His care. Man's power is so finite. God forgive me
for their mother's sake."

"Your acts were prayers," I said; "the best and noblest prayers."
"My thoughts were curses on the boys," he said, in a dreamy
voice. "I thought I— I alone—could protect them. God and all
heaven must love my wife; she is so good, I thought, her prayers
will suffice. Sorrow cannot come to them, and leave her un-
scathed. Something in my mind defied God and heaven to hurt
them. I am struck through them, and my gentle wife. Heaven
shield her!"

"We do not know that harm has come to them," I replied.
"They are dead," he said, and I shuddered, for his voice seemed
a prophecy.

"They are with me now. My boys, go to your mother, I can bear
it alone," with upturned face he spoke to the skies. Was he
going mad? I thought.

"They are gone. They always loved their mother. They will
protect her now."

I put my hand on his shoulder, I could not speak. My grief
had made me dumb. I loved the boys only second to my own,
and their father better than any of my kin. I could not see his
face in the dark, but he spoke with the certainty of inspiration—
or madness. On we sped, neither speaking a word. Soon we
saw a light in the distance; and, reaching it, found it was above
the electro-car. Again we took in power.

"You will arrive in about two hours," said the man in charge.
"You have more power now than you can use."

As we bade him good-night, and moved away, he called out,—
"God be good to you, Duke Dreman," and my heart echoed
his words.

"That man knows," said the duke. "God help me, they all
know but me, and I know best of all. They only think my boys
are dead; but I know they are born to eternity, for I feel them
with me in the air."

We were speeding rapidly onwards. It was now after the
second hour. At last, at break of day, we reached the camp.
We could see groups of men about. I shuddered, and felt faint.
We stopped in the centre of the huts, and the duke sprang out.
I followed him. The boys were not there; something dreadful
must have happened. The duke went to a man who stood
forward from the others.

"What does this mean?" he asked. "Where are my boys?"
The man put up both hands.
"There has been an accident. It might . . . ." The duke interrupted him.

"The bear has killed them, I know. Bring me to them."

The man turned and walked away in silence, and we followed him. I put my hand on Duke Dreman's shoulder, but he shook me off. We stopped at the door of one of the largest huts; the man hesitated.

"Duke Dreman," and the tears rolled down his cheeks, "you are a brave man and a great; but even you must bow to the will of God. May He be good to you."

"Lead on," said the duke. His voice was calm and passionless.

The man opened the door, and a few steps brought us to a big room, in the centre of which, on a table, the two boys lay cold and dead. The duke went up to them. Novel was the nearer. He stooped over and kissed Vernon on the mouth, the cold dead mouth. For a moment he shivered, then he recovered, and kissed Novel as he had kissed his brother. Sitting down beside the boys, he stroked their hair, and carefully smoothed out some wrinkles in the counterpane. He did it slowly and carefully, as if it were a matter of moment. For the first time since we started I saw his face. It looked old and ashy. Under the sunken eyes were dark rings. The face was grey-looking and wrinkled, while the lips had a bluish tinge as with cold. He continued to look at the boys, and occasionally to smooth their hair, or touch their cheeks. I went out and brought him some brandy. He looked at me, he seemed hardly able to understand at first, then he took the glass and drank the liquor. It did him good.

"They are with their mother, Frank. This only was them." He put his hand on the corpse. "I can bear it better than she can. God help her."

He thought most of his wife, of his own agony he seemed to think nothing. I saw he must be stirred up, or he would go mad or die, so I went out and inquired how it happened. When I had learnt all about it, I brought back the man who seemed to know most.

"Vernon," I asked, "would you like to hear how the boys met their death?"

"It does not matter," he answered. "They are dead. A bear killed them, I always knew the bears would work me sorrow."

He spoke indifferently; at any risk I must rouse him.

"Tell the duke how it happened," I said to the man.

"After dinner," he commenced, "the boys and the young Rodas took the sleigh, and went to hunt and fish. They first came to where I was, and asked me about the silver foxes. After chatting awhile, I volunteered to go with them and show them the foxes' run if they would put me down where I wished to go, and bring me back again on their return. To this they agreed.

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They had not brought the dogs, as they feared they might spoil the foxes' skins. I showed them the foxes' trail, and then left them and went to fish. From the Rodas I learned that they then hunted and caught three silver foxes, after which they went fishing. First Novel was put down with the younger Roda, then Vernon went further back with the sleigh, and commenced to fish, but caught nothing, so he left the sleigh, and walked with the Roda back towards Novel, fishing here and there as he went. They had no luck; as Novel did not come, they guessed he was more fortunate, and so determined to go to him. At last they passed round some large ice mounds, and saw Novel and the young Roda busily fishing, with a heap of fine fish beside them. Hardly had they come in view of Novel, when they saw approaching him, unperceived, a great polar bear. Vernon was now over a mile and a half from the sleigh, and about half a mile from Novel. Had he gone back for the sleigh, the bear would almost certainly have killed Novel before he could return. He and Novel were only armed with a spear each, poor weapons with which to face a bear. He evidently did not hesitate, but Winda was too frightened to go with him and rushed off to me. The younger Roda said they heard a shout, and looking up saw Vernon running towards them waving a spear in his hand. They went towards him, and soon heard him call out, 'The bear, the bear!'

Vernon groaned. He looked so old and worn. He seemed to have grown smaller since yesterday.

"Go on," he said to the man.

"Seeing the bear, the young Roda dropped his spear and ran. Novel called after him but without effect. The boys picked up the spear the Roda had dropped, and together faced the bear."

The man stopped, his face distorted with feeling. He showed more emotion than the duke.

"Those cowardly beasts of Rodas, damn them, had they stood by the boys, their four spears would have been more than a match for the bear," the man gasped with indignation. "The boys should have run, they were fleeter than the Rodas, and the bear would have stopped to kill the young savages, and so they could have reached the sleigh in safety."

At last the duke looked up.

"Better as it is. Much better they should die brave, than live as cowards."

Aye, much better. Though I wished for once they had been cowards, and sacrificed the worthless wretched Rodas to save their lives. Lives of precious value to all Undara.

Though still . . .? Human nature cannot change for once. The brave are always brave. The cowards always afraid.

The man continued: "The boys faced the bear. They walked towards her about eight feet apart. Their footmarks showed they trotted to meet the monster. The footsteps also showed that
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Vernon threw one of the spears. It evidently struck the bear, for it lies blood-covered and broken in her footmarks. The brute must then have rushed at Vernon, whose second spear evidently missed its mark, and the bear killed him in an instant. Novel, as the bear caught Vernon, stuck his spear through her, and in turn was caught and killed. The bear, badly wounded, then turned and left them dead upon the ice. The Roda came to me and I returned. He followed at a safe distance. On our way back we met the younger Roda, who joined his brother. When I came to the sleigh, I waited for the Rodas, and together we went to the boys. They lay on the ice, crushed and dead. The bear was out of sight, but her tracts were smeared with blood, so she must have been badly wounded. We took the boys up and brought them home."

Again the duke looked up. This time he shivered.

"I must bring them home," he said, wearily. "God be merciful to their mother."

He thought most of his wife. Always he strove to shield her from harm and all sorrow.

"Winda's hands were covered with blood. When he came in he went to the gull's cage, took one out, made a cross on its back with his blood-smeared finger. Then drawing his hand along the bird's breast, threw it into the air to carry home its bloody tidings of death."

Again the duke shivered.

"Did you kill the bear?" he asked.

"No," answered the man; "it only occurred yesterday evening, the sun had only just risen. We will kill the brute to-day."

"Frank, let us kill the bear," said the duke. "They are savage useless brutes. It may ruin other hopes than mine. Then we will take them back to their mother."

"Leave the brute, Vernon," I implored; "others will kill it if it had fifty lives. Rest and eat, and we will go back to Cora. Think of her, Vernon; for her sake eat and rest. Then we will return."

"I will eat. I cannot rest," he answered wearily—so wearily. "She would have the bear killed, before it does more harm. Frank, we will kill the brute, and then bring the boys back to their mother."

Seeing that opposition was useless, I brought him some food. Together we ate beside the dead boys. He would not leave them. He was numbed with grief.

"I shall write to my wife," he said.

The letter was written, and sent by a gull. I did not see it till afterwards, but I shall reproduce it now. Brief as it was, it told all that there was to say.

"MY DEAR WIFE,—The worst has happened. The boys have been killed by a bear. Frank and I are now going to kill the brute, and then we will bring the boys back to you,"

"Your loving husband,

"Vernon."
When this was despatched we went after the bear. Two other sleighs followed ours. In half an hour we had come to the scene of the boys' death. Their blood lay bright and scarlet on the snow. The duke shuddered. The footprints plainly proved the story told us. There were the marks where Vernon had stopped to hurl the spear, the footprints deep with the effort of throwing the weapon. Near by the marks where the bear had caught the boys, one by one, and crushed them to death. Then its deep footprints, blood-stained from the wound of Novel's spear. Had they a gun, their revolvers, the sleigh, or had any one of simple things innumerable happened, they would have been saved. It would have been so easy to prevent the catastrophe had we only known. Surely it was the will of the Almighty power that we should not know, and that this awful thing should be. We followed the tracks. A pool of blood marked where the bear had stopped, the footmarks became nearer, and showed the feet had been dragged, or slouched along. Slowly we followed the trail till it came to a snow-covered heap of granite boulders, the jagged peaks of two or three of which stood out bare; too steep for the snow to lodge on; under one of these the bear had gone for shelter. Before we had quite stopped the duke leapt out, only armed with a spear, and sprang up the sides of the steep declivity. Snatching up a rifle, I called out,—

"Stop, Vernon, stop," and rushed after him.

From every sleigh sprang armed men, and hurried in our wake. On sprang the duke. The footprints spotted with blood were plain and distinct on the snow. A frenzy of rage made the sorrow-stricken father fleet as a deer. He was fully ten paces ahead of me. Scrambling steps came fast behind me. The bear, who had crawled into a shallow cave made by two boulders touching, had heard us, and came out. The duke was directly between us, so I could not shoot. On he sprang. The bear stood tall, and strong, on its hind legs. For an instant, as the duke stopped, the spear came backwards over his right shoulder, and with a spring he plunged it at the monster's heart. Quick as lightning the spear was knocked out of his hand, and he lay in my path bleeding and stunned by a blow on the neck from the bear's powerful paw. I fired, not feet ten from the brute. It threw up its forefeet, but before it fell, two bullets whizzed past me to plunge into its great white body. I stooped over the duke; from under his ear came two fountains of blood. The brute's claw had severed the jugular vein. The bear was lifeless; I had hardly time to think; left alone, the brave sorrow-stricken man would bleed to death in a few minutes. I took from my pocket the little instrument-case all doctors carry, and from it a lance and thread. The fingers of one of my hands were pressing the vein to reduce the flow of blood. I wanted two hands to tie up the artery. I looked up; one of the men saw my dilemma.
"Can I help you, Doctor Frank?" he asked.
"Yes," I replied, gratefully. "Catch hold with your finger and thumb."
"Vein cut?"
"Artery, yes."
Nothing now was said. The duke opened his eyes.
"Lie still, Vernon."
He closed them, and lay quiet; soon I had tied up both ends of the artery, and bound up the wound. We prepared to take him to the sleigh.
"Show me the bear," asked Duke Dreman.
His voice was very weak. Gently turning him over, I put him so that he could see the great dead brute. It was the bear that had been robbed of its cub, and had come after the fools that had robbed it. Pity it had not met them instead of the two brave boys.
"Poor thing," he said. "It only acted according to its nature, poor thing." He shut his eyes, and we took him to the sleigh.
As we sped over the snow, he asked, his words weak and faint:
"Am I hurt?"
"A little," I answered.
"Fatally?" he asked, calmly, but weakly.
"Lie still," I answered, broken-hearted, trying to avoid the question. "Thinking will make you worse."
"Fatally?" He repeated the word more gently.
"God help me, I fear so," I replied, the tears running down my cheeks. It was awful. His hand came out from the covering, and caught hold of mine. I put it to my lips. The hand so strong and generous, soon to lie cold and dead. He lay quite quiet.
By the time we reached the station I had recovered my composure.
"Take us to Cora, Frank," he asked, wistfully.
Word was sent on, to be flashed along our road, to have everything in readiness for our journey. Soon I commenced the journey back with the dead and the dying. An awful journey. It seemed that horrors would never cease. But a few hours before we had been startled by the blood-stained gull. Then the traveling to the boys. The awful silent journey through the hideous shadows, and under the infinite stillness of the heavens, that seemed to compare us with their immensity, and mock at the bitterness of our grief. After all, that journey was but pregnant with fears and sorrows, while this was bitter with agony from fate's womb. It seemed to me that no more evil could come to the fair woman whose dying husband and dead sons were with me. Was her happy life to end with a great wave of grief? Do great joys bring great sorrows? Would we find the beautiful woman dead with horror? Happy for her if it could be so. No joy could come to her now, I thought. All joy for her would be beyond the gates of death.
As we came to the road, and passed the houses, people stood by the wayside weeping and grief-stricken. Worse than war seemed the evil that had befallen their hero. The men took off their hats and bowed their heads. The women covered their faces, and wept. All the land was in sorrow for the death of the sons of the man who had done so much for the people; of his state as yet few knew. In the dusk of one day, we left in terror of a possible grief. Now, on the dusk of the next, we returned; the boys dead, and the father dying. As we entered the yard, the dogs came fawning round, expecting to welcome one or other of the men of the house who were its light and joy. The horses, hearing the wheels and the dogs, winnowed their welcome. Neither the duchess nor my wife had come to meet us. All the duke’s people were gathered, pale and grief-stricken. The duchess had asked that the boys should be brought into her room. We took them in. She was on her knees praying. While the duke relied solely on his own skill and ability, she went with her petitions to the Almighty. She rose and came to the boys. Kissing their cold faces, she sank on her knees beside them; and with her face hidden in her hands, wept and prayed. Leaving her so, I went and brought in the duke, who had wakened up from his sleep of exhaustion. Quietly we put him on the bed. The duchess still wept on. The duke silently watched her. Presently she looked up with streaming face, and for the first time saw her husband. For a moment she looked at him in silence. Then he spoke. “Cora.” His voice was weak and low, but in the dead silence of the room it sounded distinctly. She got up and went to him, moving as if she was dazed. “My husband, has it brought you to this?” She stroked his pale face. “Kiss me, dear,” he said; “I am very weak.” She kissed his eyes and his lips. My wife sat with folded hands and streaming eyes. “Dear,” he said, “I have much for you to do.” “What has happened, my love—my hero?” asked the poor dazed wife. “Tell her, Frank,” he said, turning his eyes towards me. He was now quite calm and collected; he was always so in times of difficulty and danger. He felt his strength going, and wished to save it. I told her everything as it happened, she the while holding his hand in hers, and caressing it with her cheek. When I had finished, she simply said,— “God’s will be done. Surely my husband has been God’s instrument for good, and my sons all that is noble. They will have their reward, but I must wait, I must wait.” Her eyes were tearless, and her face fixed and pale to the lips. Presently she slid from the chair on which she sat on to her knees, and prayed. Her husband’s hand went slowly to rest on the bowed
head by his bedside, and he stroked the soft brown hair till she ceased praying; when she looked up, he said,—

"My wife, you will be very lonely."

The pitying words thawed the numbness of the woman’s grief; and again her tears came and she sobbed on and on, holding one of his hands in hers, while his other caressed her bowed head. When her sobs had almost ceased, her husband spoke,—

"Go and put on your dressing-gown, and come and lie beside me." Obediently she went, my wife leading her from the room. Then he asked, "How long?" I knew what he meant, I had expected the question. "With the morning if you talk," I answered, "to-morrow night, if you are quiet."

"Delirious?" he asked, quietly.

"Possibly," I answered, overcome with emotion.

"Remember, Frank, treat her and them as I would have treated yours, had there been need, kindly as your own." He gave me his hand, and shut his eyes. And so, palm to palm, I watched by the side of the man whose noble career had nearly ended, and who was beyond the power of human aid.