

CHAPTER VI

MARRIAGE--AND AFTER

Sir Robert and I stood facing each other speechless with rage, both of us. At length he said in a hoarse voice:

"Your pardon, Master Hastings, for the affronts that this bastard lordling has put upon you, an honest man. I tell you that he is a loose-living knave, as you would agree if you knew all his story, a cockatrice that for my sins I have nurtured in my bosom. 'Tis he that has wasted all my substance; 'tis he that has made free of my name, so that I fear me you are defrauded. 'Tis he that uses my house as though it were his own, bringing into it vile women of the Court, and men that are viler still, however high their names and gaudy their attire," and he choked with his wrath and stopped.

"Why do you suffer these things, sir?" I asked.

"Forsooth because I must," he answered sullenly, "for he has me and mine by the throat. This Deleroy is very powerful, Master Hastings. At a word from him whispered in the King's ear, I, or you, or any man might find ourselves in the Tower accused of treason, whence we should appear no more."

Then, as though he wished to get away from the subject of Deleroy and

his hold upon him, he went on:

"I fear me that your money, or much of it, is in danger for Deleroy's bond is worthless, and since the land is already pledged without my knowledge, I have nowhere to turn for gold. I tell you that I am an honest man if one who has fallen into ill company, and this wickedness cuts me deep, for I know not how you will be repaid."

Now a thought came to me, and as was my bold fashion in all business, I acted on it instantly.

"Sir Robert Aleys," I said, "should it be pleasing to you and another, I can see a way in which this debt may be cancelled without shame to you and yet to my profit."

"Then in God's name speak it! For I see none."

"Sir, in bygone time, as it chanced I was able yonder at Hastings to do some service to your daughter and in that hour she took my heart."

He started but motioned to me to continue.

"Sir, I love her truly and desire more than anything to make her my wife. I know she is far above me in station, still although but a merchant, I am of good descent as I can prove to you. Moreover, I am rich, for this money that I have advanced to you, or to the lord

Deleroy, is but a small part of my wealth which grows day by day through honest trade. Sir, if my suit were accepted I should be ready, not only to help you further on certain terms, but by deed and will to settle most of it upon the lady Blanche and upon our children. Sir, what say you?"

Sir Robert tugged at his red beard and stared down at the floor. Presently he lifted his head and I saw that his face was troubled, the face of a man, indeed, who is struggling with himself, or, as I thought, with his pride.

"A fair offer fairly put," he said, "but the question is, not what I say, but what says Blanche."

"Sir, I do not know who have never asked her. Yet at times I have thought that her mind towards me is not unkind."

"Is it so? Well, perhaps now that he--well, let that lie. Master Hastings, you have my leave to try your fortune and I tell you straight that I hope it will be good. With your wealth your rank may be soon mended and you are an honest man whom I should be glad to welcome as a son, for I have had enough of these Court knaves and painted Jezebels. But if such is your fancy towards Blanche, my counsel to you is that you put it quickly to the proof--aye, man, at once. Mark my words, for such a swan as she is many snares are set beneath the dirty waters of this Court."

"The sooner the better, sir."

"Good. I'll send her to you and, one word more--be not over shy, or ready to take the first 'no' for an answer, or to listen to the tale of bygone fancies, such as all women have."

Then suddenly he went, leaving me there wondering at his words and manner, which I did not understand. This I understood, however, that he desired that I should marry Blanche, which considering all things I held somewhat strange, although I had the wealth she lacked. Doubtless, I thought, it must be because his honour had been touched on the matter of the trick that had been played upon him without his knowledge. Then I ceased from these wonderings and gave my thought to what I should say to Blanche.

I waited a long while and still she did not come, till at last I believed that she was away from the house, or guessing my business, had refused to see me. At length, however, she entered the room, so silently that I who was staring at the great abbey through a window-place never heard the door open or close. I think that some sense of her presence must have drawn me, since suddenly I turned to see her standing before me. She was clad all in white, having a round cap or coronet upon her head beneath which her shining fair hair was looped in braids. Her little coat, trimmed with ermine, was fastened with a single jewel, that ruby heart embraced by serpents which I had given her. She wore no other

ornament. Thus seen she looked most lovely and most sweet and all my heart went out in yearning for her.

"My father tells me that you wish to speak with me, so I have come," she said in her low clear voice, searching my face curiously with her large eyes.

I bowed my head and paused, not knowing how to begin.

"How can I serve you, who, I fear, have been ill served?" she went on with a little smile as though she found amusement in my confusion.

"In one way only," I exclaimed, "by giving yourself in marriage to me. For that I seek, no less."

Now her fair face that had been pale became stained with red and she let her eyes fall as though she were searching for something among the rushes that strewed the floor.

"Hearken before you answer," I continued. "When first I spoke with you on that bloody day at Hastings and you had but just come to womanhood, I loved you and swore to myself that I would die to save you. I saved you and we kissed and were parted. Afterwards I tried to put you out of my heart, knowing that you were set far above me and no meat for such as I, though still for your sake I wooed no other woman in marriage. The years went by and fortune brought us together again, and lo! the old love was

stronger than before. I know that I am not worthy of you who are so high and good and pure. Still----" and I stopped, lacking words.

She moved uneasily and the red colour left her cheeks as though she had been suddenly pained.

"Bethink you," she said with a touch of hardness in her voice, "can one who lives the life I live and keeps my company, remain as holy and unstained as you believe? If you would gather such a lily, surely you should seek it in a country garden, not in the reek of London."

"I neither know nor care," I answered, whose blood was all afire. "I know only that wherever you grow and from whatever soil, you are the flower I would pluck."

"Bethink you again; an ugly slug might have smeared my whiteness."

"If so the honest sun and rain will recover and wash it and I am a gardener who scatters lime to shrivel slugs."

"If to this one you will not listen, then hear another argument. Perchance I do not love you. Would you win a loveless bride?"

"Perchance you can learn of love, or if not, I have enough to serve for two."

"By my faith! it should not be difficult with a man so honest and so well favoured. And yet--a further plea. My cousin Deleroy has cheated you" (here her face hardened), "and I think I am offered to you by my father in satisfaction of his honour, as men who have no gold offer a house or a horse to close a debt."

"It is not so. I prayed you of your father. The loss, if loss there be, is but a chance of trade, such as I face every day. Still, I will be plain and tell you that I risked it with open eyes, expecting nothing less, that I might come near to you."

Now she sat herself down in a chair, covering her face with her hands, and I saw from the trembling of her body that she was sobbing. While I wondered what to do, for the sight wrung me, she let fall her hands and there were tears upon her face.

"Shall I tell you all my story, you good, simple gentleman?" she asked.

"Nay, only two things. Are you the wife of some other man?"

"Not so, though perhaps--once I went near to it. What is the other question?"

"Do you love some other man so that your heart tells you it is not possible that you should ever love me?"

"No, I do not," she answered almost fiercely, "but by the Rood! I hate one."

"Which is no affair of mine," I said, laughing. "For the rest, let it sleep. Few are they that know life's wars who have no scar to hide, and I am not one of them, though in truth your lips made the deepest yonder by the cave at Hastings."

When she heard this she coloured to her brow and forgetting her tears, laughed outright, while I went on:

"Therefore let the past be and if it is your will, let us set our eyes upon the future. Only one promise would I ask of you, that never again will you be alone with the lord Deleroy, since one so light-fingered with a pen would, I think, steal other things."

"By my soul! the last thing I desire is to be alone with my cousin Deleroy."

Now she rose from the chair and for a little while we stood facing each other. Then she very slightly opened her arms and lifted her face towards me.

Thus did Blanche Aleys and I become affianced, though afterwards, when I thought the business over, I remembered that never once did she say that she would marry me. This, however, troubled me little, since in such

matters it is what women do that weighs, not what they say. For the rest I was mad with love of her, also both then and as the days went by, more and more did she seem to be travelling on this same road of Love. If not, indeed she acted well.

Within a month we were wed on a certain October day in the church of St. Margaret's at Westminster. Once it was agreed all desired to push on this marriage, and not least Blanche herself. Sir Robert Aleys said that he wished to be gone from London to his estates in Sussex, having had enough of the Court and its ways, desiring there to live quietly till the end; I, being so much in love, was on fire for my bride, and Blanche herself vowed that she was eager to become my wife, saying that our courtship, which began on Hastings Hill, had lasted long enough. For the rest, there was nothing to cause delay. I cancelled Sir Robert's debt to me and signed a deed in favour of his daughter and her offspring, whereof I gave a copy to his lawyer and there was nought else to be done except to prepare my house for her which, with money at command, was easy.

No great business was made of this marriage, since neither his kin nor Sir Robert himself wished to noise it about that his only child, the last of his House, was taking a merchant for her husband to save her and him from wreck. Nor did I, the merchant, wish to provoke talk amongst those of my own station, especially as it was known that I had advanced moneys to these fine folks of the Court. So it came about that few were asked to the ceremony that was fixed for an early hour, and of these

not many came, because on that day, although it was but October, a great gale with storms of rain began to blow, the greatest indeed that I had known in my life.

Thus it chanced that we were wed in an almost empty church while the fierce wind, thundering against the windows, overcame the feeble voice of the old priest, so that he looked like one acting in a show without words. The darkness caused by the thick rain was so deep, also, that scarce could I see my bride's lovely face or find the finger upon which I must set the ring.

At length it was done and we went down the aisle to find our horses whereon we must ride to my house in Cheapside, where there was to be a feast for my dependents and such of my few friends as cared to come, among whom were not numbered any grand folk from Westminster. As we drew near the church door I noted among those who were present those two gaudy ladies between whom Deleroy had sat at that meal after the business of the loan was settled. Moreover, I heard one of them say:

"What will Deleroy do when he comes back to find his darling gone?" and the other answer with a high laugh:

"Seek another, doubtless, or borrow more money from the merchant, and----" Here I lost their talk in the rush of the wind through the opened door.

In the porch was old Sir Robert Aleys.

"Mother of God!" he shouted, "may the rest of the lives of you two be smoother than your nuptials. No Cheapside feast for me, I'm for home in such fiend's weather. Farewell, son Hubert, and all joy to you. Farewell, Blanche. Learn to be obedient as a wife and keep your eyes for your husband's face, that is my counsel to you. Till we meet again at Christmastide in Sussex, whither I ride to-morrow, farewell to both of you."

Farewell, it was indeed, for never did either of us look on him again.

Wrapped close in our cloaks we battled through the storm and at length, somewhat breathless, reached my house in the Cheap where the garlands of autumn flowers and greenery that I had caused to be wreathed from posts before the door were all torn away by the gale. Here I welcomed my wife as best I could, kissing her as she crossed the threshold and saying certain sweet words that I had prepared, to which she smiled an answer. Then the women took her to her chamber to make herself ready and afterwards came the feast, which was sumptuous of its sort, though the evil weather kept some of the guests away.

Scarcely had it begun when Kari, who of late had been sad-faced and brooding, and who did not eat with us, entered and whispered to me that my Master of Lading from the docks prayed to see me at once on a matter which would brook no delay. Making excuse to Blanche and the company,

I went out to see him in the shop and found the man much disturbed. It seemed that a certain vessel of mine that I had rechristened *Blanche* in honour of my wife, which lay in the stream ready to sail, was in great danger because of the tempest. Indeed, she was dragging at her anchor, and it was feared that unless more anchors could be let down she would come ashore and be wrecked against the jetty-heads or otherwise. The reason why this had not been done, was that only the master and one sailor were on board the vessel; the rest were feasting ashore in honour of my marriage, and refused to row out to her, saying that the boat would be swamped in the gale.

Now this ship, although not very large, was the best and staunchest that I owned, being almost new; moreover, the cargo on board of her, laden for the Mediterranean, was of great value, so great indeed that its loss would have been very grievous to me. Therefore, it was plain that I must see to the matter without delay, since from my servant's account there was no hope that these rebellious sailors would listen to any lesser man than myself. So, if I would save the ship and her cargo, I must ride for the docks at once.

Going back to the eating-chamber, in a few words I told my wife and the guests how the matter stood, praying the oldest man among the latter to take my place by the bride, which he did unwillingly, muttering that this was an unlucky marriage feast.

Then it was that *Blanche* rose, beseeching me earnestly and almost with

tears that I would take her with me to the docks. I laughed at her, as did the company, but still she besought with much persistence, till I began to believe that she must be afraid of something, though the others cried that it was but love and fear lest I should come to harm.

In the end I made her drink a cup of wine with me, but her hand shook so much that she spilled the cup and the rich red wine ran down her breast, staining the whiteness of her robe, whereat some women among the company

murmured, thinking it a bad omen. At length with a kiss I tore myself away, for I could bide no longer and the horses were waiting presently.

So I was riding for the docks as fast as the storm would suffer, with tiles from the roofs, and when we were clear of these the torn-off limbs of trees hurtling round me. Kari, I should say, would have accompanied me, but I took a serving-man, bidding Kari bide where he was in the house in case he might be of service.

At last we came safely to the docks where I found all as my cargo-master had described. The ship *Blanche* was in great peril and dragging every minute towards a pierhead which, if she struck, would stave her in and make an end of her. The men, too, were still feasting in the inn with their wharfside trollops, and some of them half drunk. I spoke to them, showing them their shame, and saying that if they would not come, I and my man would take a boat and get aboard alone and this upon my wedding day. Then they hung their heads and came.

We won to the ship safely though with much toil and danger, and there found the master almost crazed with fear and doubt of the issue, and the man with him injured by a falling block. Indeed, this poor captain clung to the rail, watching the cable as it dragged the anchor and fearing every moment lest it should part.

The rest is soon told. We got out two more anchors and did other things such as sailors know, to help in such a case. When all was as safe as it could be made, I and my man and four sailors started for the quay, telling the master that I would return upon the morrow. The wind and current aiding us, we landed safe and sound and at once I rode back to Cheapside.

Now, though it is short to tell, all this had taken a long while, also the way was far to ride in such a storm. Thus it came about that it was nigh to ten o'clock at night when, thanking God, I dismounted at the gate of my house and bade the servant take the horses to the stable. As I drew near the door, it opened, which astonished me and, as the light within showed, there stood Kari. What astonished me still more, he had the great sword, Wave-Flame, in his hand, though not drawn, which sword he must have fetched from where it was kept with the French knight's armour and the shield that bore three arrows as a cognizance.

Laying his finger on his lips he shut the door softly, then said in a low voice:

"Master, there is a man up yonder with the lady."

"What man?" I asked.

"That same lord, Master, who came here with her once before to buy jewels and borrow gold. Hearken. The feast being finished the guests went away at fall of night, but the wife-lady withdrew herself into the chamber that is called sun-room (the solar), that up the stairs, which looks out on the street. About one hour gone there came a knock at the door. I who was watching, opened, thinking it was you returned, and there stood that lord. He spoke to me, saying:

"Moor-man, I know that your master is from home, but that the lady is here. I would speak with her."

"Now I would have turned him away, but at that moment the lady herself, who it seemed was watching, came down the stairs, looking very white, and said:

"Kari, let the lord come in. I have matters of your master's business about which I must talk with him." So, Master, knowing that you had lent money to this lord, I obeyed, though I liked it not, and having fetched the sword which I thought perchance might be needed, I waited."

This was the substance of what he said, though his talk was more broken since he never learned to speak English well and helped it out with

words of his own tongue, of which, as I have told, he had taught me something.

"I do not understand," I exclaimed, when he had finished. "Doubtless it is little or nothing. Yet give me the sword, for who knows? and come with me."

Kari obeyed, and as I went up the stairs I buckled Wave-Flame about me. Also Kari brought two candles of Italian wax lighted upon their stands. Coming to the door of the solar I tried to open it, but it was bolted.

"God's truth!" I said, "this is strange," and hammered on the panel with my fist.

Presently it opened, but before entering it, for I feared some trick, I stood without and looked in. The room was lit by a hanging lamp and a fire burned brightly on the hearth, for the night was cold. In an oak chair by the fire and staring into it sat Blanche still as any statue. She glanced round and saw me in the light of the candles that Kari held, and again stared into the fire. Half-way between her and the door stood Deleroy, dressed as ever in fine clothes, though I noted that his cape was off and hung over a stool near the fire as though to dry. I noted also that he wore a sword and a dagger. I entered the room, followed by Kari, shut the door behind me and shot the bolt. Then I spoke, asking:

"Why are you here with my wife, Lord Deleroy?"

"It is strange, Master merchant," he answered, "but I was about to put much the same question to you: namely, why is my wife in your house?"

Now, while I reeled beneath these words, without turning her head, Blanche by the fire said:

"He lies, Hubert. I am not his wife."

"Why are you here, my Lord Deleroy?" I repeated.

"Well, if you would know, Master merchant, I bring a paper for you, or rather a copy of it, for the writ itself will be served on you to-morrow by the King's officers. It commits you to the Tower under the royal seal for trading with the King's enemies, a treason that can be proved against you, of which as you know, or will shortly learn, the punishment is death," and as he spoke he threw a writing down upon a side table.

"I see the plot," I answered coldly. "The King's unworthy favourite, forger and thief, uses the King's authority to try to bring the King's honest subject to bonds and death by a false accusation. It is a common trick in these days. But let that be. For the third time I ask you--why are you here with my new-wed wife and at this hour of the night?"

"So courteous a question demands a courteous answer, Master merchant, but to give it I must trouble you to listen to a tale."

"Then let it be like my patience, brief," I replied.

"It shall," he said with a mocking bow.

Then very clearly and quietly he set out a dreadful story, giving dates and circumstances. Let that story be. The substance of it was that he had married Blanche soon after she reached womanhood and that she had borne him a child which died.

"Blanche," I said when he had done, "you have heard. Is this true?"

"Much of it is true," she answered in that strange, cold voice, still staring at the fire. "Only the marriage was a false one by which I was deceived. He who celebrated it was a companion of the Lord Deleroy tricked out as a priest."

"Do not let us wrangle of this matter," said Deleroy. "A man who mixes with the world like yourself, Master merchant, will know that women in a trap rarely lack excuses. Still if it be admitted that this marriage did not fulfil all formalities, then so much the better for Blanche and myself. If she be your lawful wife and not mine, you, I learn, have signed a writing in her favour under which she will inherit your great wealth. That indenture I think you can find no opportunity to dispute, and if you do I have a promise that the property of a certain traitor shall pass to me, the revealer of his treachery. Let it console you in

your last moments, Master merchant, to remember that the lady whom you have honoured with your fancy will pass her days in wealth and comfort in the company of him whom she has honoured with her love."

"Draw!" I said briefly as I unsheathed my sword.

"Why should I fight with a base, trading usurer?" he asked, still mocking me, though I thought that there was doubt in his voice.

"Answer your own question, thief. Fight if you will, or die without fighting if you will not. For know that until I am dead you do not leave this room living."

"Until I dead too, O Lord," broke in Kari in his gentle voice, bowing in his courteous foreign fashion.

As he did so with a sudden motion Kari shook the cloak back from his body and for the first time I saw that thrust through his leathern belt was a long weapon, half sword and half dagger, also that its sharpened steel was bare.

"Oh!" exclaimed Deleroy, "now I understand that I am trapped and that when you told me, Blanche, that this man would not return to-night and that therefore we were safe together, you lied. Well, my Lady Blanche, you shall pay for this trick later."

Whilst he spoke thus, slowly, as though to gain time, he was looking about him, and as the last word left his lips, knowing that the door was locked, he dashed for the window, hoping, I suppose, to leap through the casement, or if that failed, to shout for help. But Kari, who had set the candles he bore on a side table, that where the writing lay, read his mind. With a movement more swift than that of a polecat leaping on its prey, the swiftest indeed that ever I saw, he sprang between him and the casement, so that Deleroy scarce escaped pinning himself upon the steel that he held in his long, outstretched arm. Indeed, I think it pricked his throat, for he checked himself with an oath and drew his sword, a double-edged weapon with a sharp point, as long as mine perhaps, but not so heavy.

"I see that I must finish the pair of you. Perchance, Blanche, you will protect my back as a loving wife should do, until this lout is done with," he said, swaggering to the last.

"Kari," I commanded, "hold the candles aloft that the light may be good, and leave this man to me."

Kari bowed and took the copper taper stands, one in either hand, and held them aloft. But first he placed his long dagger, not back in his belt, but between his teeth with the handle towards his right hand. Even then in some strange fashion I noted how terrible looked this grim dark man holding the candles high with the knife gripped between his white teeth.

Deleroy and I faced each other in the open space between the fire and the door. Blanche turned round upon her stool and watched, uttering no sound. But I laughed aloud for of the end I had no doubt. Had there been ten Deleroys I would have slain them all. Still presently I found there was cause to doubt, for when, parrying his first thrust, I drove at him with all my strength, instead of piercing him through and through the ancient sword, Wave-Flame, bent in my hand like a bow as it is strung, telling me that beneath his Joseph's coat of silk Deleroy wore a shirt of mail.

Then I cried: "A-hoi!" as Thorgrimmer my ancestor may have done when he wielded this same sword, and while Deleroy still staggered beneath my thrust I grasped Wave-Flame with both hands, wheeled it aloft, and smote. He lifted his arm round which he had wound his cloak, to protect his head, but the sword shore through cloak and arm, so that his hand with the glittering rings upon it fell to the floor.

Again I smote for, as both of us knew, this business was to the death, and Deleroy fell down dead, smitten through the brain.

Kari smiled gently, and lifting the cloak, shook it out and threw it over what had been Deleroy. Then he took my sword and while I watched him idly, cleansed it with rushes from the floor.

Next I heard a sound from the neighbourhood of the fire, and bethinking

me of Blanche turned to speak to her, though what I was going to say God knows for I do not.

A terrible sight met my eyes and burned itself into my very soul so that it could never be forgot. Blanche was leaning back in the oak chair over which flowed her long, fair locks, and the front of her robe was red. I remembered how she had spilt the wine at the feast and thought I saw its stain, till presently, still staring, I noted that it grew and knew it to be caused by another wine, that of her blood. Also I noted that from the midst of it seen in the lamplight, just beneath the snake-encircled ruby heart, appeared the little handle of a dagger.

I sprang to her, but she lifted her hand and waved me back.

"Touch me not," she whispered, "I am not fit, also the thrust is mortal. If you draw the knife I shall die at once, and first I would speak. I would have you know that I love you and hoped to be a good wife to you. What I said was true. That dead man tricked me with a false marriage when I was scarcely more than a child, and afterwards he would not mend it with an honest. Perchance he himself was wed, or he had other reasons, I do not know. My father guessed much but not all. I tried to warn you when you offered yourself, but you were deaf and blind and would not see or listen. Then I gave way, liking you well and thinking that I should find rest, as indeed I do; thinking also that I should be wealthy and able to shut that villain's mouth with gold. I never knew he was coming here or even that he had sailed home from France, but he

broke in upon me, having learned that you were away, and was about to leave when you returned. He came for money for which he believed that I had wed, and thinking to win me back from one doomed by his lies to a traitor's death. You know the rest, and for me there was but one thing to do. Be glad that you are no longer burdened with me and go find happiness in the arms of a more fortunate or a better woman. Fly, and swiftly, for Deleroy had many friends and the King himself loved him as a brother--as well he may. Fly, I say, and forgive--forgive! Hubert, farewell!"

Thus she spoke, ever more slowly and lower, till with the last word her life left her lips.

Thus ended the story of my marriage with Blanche Aleys.