

## DAME THE THIRD--THE MARCHIONESS OF STONEHENGE

By the Rural Dean

I would have you know, then, that a great many years ago there lived in a classical mansion with which I used to be familiar, standing not a hundred miles from the city of Melchester, a lady whose personal charms were so rare and unparalleled that she was courted, flattered, and spoilt by almost all the young noblemen and gentlemen in that part of Wessex. For a time these attentions pleased her well. But as, in the words of good Robert South (whose sermons might be read much more than they are),

the most passionate lover of sport, if tied to follow his hawks and hounds every day of his life, would find the pursuit the greatest torment and calamity, and would fly to the mines and galleys for his recreation, so did this lofty and beautiful lady after a while become satiated with the constant iteration of what she had in its novelty enjoyed; and by an almost natural revulsion turned her regards absolutely netherward, socially speaking. She perversely and passionately centred her affection on quite a plain-looking young man of humble birth and no position at all; though it is true that he was gentle and delicate in nature, of good address, and guileless heart. In short, he was the parish-clerk's son, acting as assistant to the land-steward of her father, the Earl of Avon, with the hope of becoming some day a land-steward himself. It should be said that perhaps the Lady Caroline (as she was called) was a little stimulated in this passion by the discovery that a young girl of the

village already loved the young man fondly, and that he had paid some attentions to her, though merely of a casual and good-natured kind.

Since his occupation brought him frequently to the manor-house and its environs, Lady Caroline could make ample opportunities of seeing and speaking to him. She had, in Chaucer's phrase, 'all the craft of fine loving' at her fingers' ends, and the young man, being of a readily-kindling heart, was quick to notice the tenderness in her eyes and voice. He could not at first believe in his good fortune, having no understanding of her weariness of more artificial men; but a time comes when the stupidest sees in an eye the glance of his other half; and it came to him, who was quite the reverse of dull. As he gained confidence accidental encounters led to encounters by design; till at length when they were alone together there was no reserve on the matter. They whispered tender words as other lovers do, and were as devoted a pair as ever was seen. But not a ray or symptom of this attachment was allowed to show itself to the outer world.

Now, as she became less and less scrupulous towards him under the influence of her affection, and he became more and more reverential under the influence of his, and they looked the situation in the face together, their condition seemed intolerable in its hopelessness. That she could ever ask to be allowed to marry him, or could hold her tongue and quietly renounce him, was equally beyond conception. They resolved upon a third course, possessing neither of the disadvantages of these two: to wed secretly, and live on in outward appearance the same as before. In this

they differed from the lovers of my friend's story.

Not a soul in the parental mansion guessed, when Lady Caroline came coolly into the hall one day after a visit to her aunt, that, during that visit, her lover and herself had found an opportunity of uniting themselves till death should part them. Yet such was the fact; the young woman who rode fine horses, and drove in pony-chaises, and was saluted deferentially by every one, and the young man who trudged about, and directed the tree-felling, and the laying out of fish-ponds in the park, were husband and wife.

As they had planned, so they acted to the letter for the space of a month and more, clandestinely meeting when and where they best could do so; both being supremely happy and content. To be sure, towards the latter part of that month, when the first wild warmth of her love had gone off, the Lady Caroline sometimes wondered within herself how she, who might have chosen a peer of the realm, baronet, knight; or, if serious-minded, a bishop or judge of the more gallant sort who prefer young wives, could have brought herself to do a thing so rash as to make this marriage; particularly when, in their private meetings, she perceived that though her young husband was full of ideas, and fairly well read, they had not a single social experience in common. It was his custom to visit her after nightfall, in her own house, when he could find no opportunity for an interview elsewhere; and to further this course she would contrive to leave unfastened a window on the ground-floor overlooking the lawn, by entering which a back stair-case was accessible; so that he could climb

up to her apartments, and gain audience of his lady when the house was still.

One dark midnight, when he had not been able to see her during the day, he made use of this secret method, as he had done many times before; and when they had remained in company about an hour he declared that it was time for him to descend.

He would have stayed longer, but that the interview had been a somewhat painful one. What she had said to him that night had much excited and angered him, for it had revealed a change in her; cold reason had come to his lofty wife; she was beginning to have more anxiety about her own position and prospects than ardour for him. Whether from the agitation of this perception or not, he was seized with a spasm; he gasped, rose, and in moving towards the window for air he uttered in a short thick whisper, 'Oh, my heart!'

With his hand upon his chest he sank down to the floor before he had gone another step. By the time that she had relighted the candle, which had been extinguished in case any eye in the opposite grounds should witness his egress, she found that his poor heart had ceased to beat; and there rushed upon her mind what his cottage-friends had once told her, that he was liable to attacks of heart-disease, one of which, the doctor had informed them, might some day carry him off.

Accustomed as she was to doctoring the other parishioners, nothing that

she could effect upon him in that kind made any difference whatever; and his stillness, and the increasing coldness of his feet and hands, disclosed too surely to the affrighted young woman that her husband was dead indeed. For more than an hour, however, she did not abandon her efforts to restore him; when she fully realized the fact that he was a corpse she bent over his body, distracted and bewildered as to what step she next should take.

Her first feelings had undoubtedly been those of passionate grief at the loss of him; her second thoughts were concern at her own position as the daughter of an earl. 'Oh, why, why, my unfortunate husband, did you die in my chamber at this hour!' she said piteously to the corpse. 'Why not have died in your own cottage if you would die! Then nobody would ever have known of our imprudent union, and no syllable would have been breathed of how I mismated myself for love of you!'

The clock in the courtyard striking the hour of one aroused Lady Caroline from the stupor into which she had fallen, and she stood up, and went towards the door. To awaken and tell her mother seemed her only way out of this terrible situation; yet when she put her hand on the key to unlock it she withdrew herself again. It would be impossible to call even her mother's assistance without risking a revelation to all the world through the servants; while if she could remove the body unassisted to a distance she might avert suspicion of their union even now. This thought of immunity from the social consequences of her rash act, of renewed freedom, was indubitably a relief to her, for, as has been said,

the constraint and riskiness of her position had begun to tell upon the Lady Caroline's nerves.

She braced herself for the effort, and hastily dressed herself; and then dressed him. Tying his dead hands together with a handkerchief; she laid his arms round her shoulders, and bore him to the landing and down the narrow stairs. Reaching the bottom by the window, she let his body slide slowly over the sill till it lay on the ground without. She then climbed over the window-sill herself, and, leaving the sash open, dragged him on to the lawn with a rustle not louder than the rustle of a broom. There she took a securer hold, and plunged with him under the trees.

Away from the precincts of the house she could apply herself more vigorously to her task, which was a heavy one enough for her, robust as she was; and the exertion and fright she had already undergone began to tell upon her by the time she reached the corner of a beech-plantation which intervened between the manor-house and the village. Here she was so nearly exhausted that she feared she might have to leave him on the spot. But she plodded on after a while, and keeping upon the grass at every opportunity she stood at last opposite the poor young man's garden-gate, where he lived with his father, the parish-clerk. How she accomplished the end of her task Lady Caroline never quite knew; but, to avoid leaving traces in the road, she carried him bodily across the gravel, and laid him down at the door. Perfectly aware of his ways of coming and going, she searched behind the shutter for the cottage door-key, which she placed in his cold hand. Then she kissed his face for the

last time, and with silent little sobs bade him farewell.

Lady Caroline retraced her steps, and reached the mansion without hindrance; and to her great relief found the window open just as she had left it. When she had climbed in she listened attentively, fastened the window behind her, and ascending the stairs noiselessly to her room, set everything in order, and returned to bed.

The next morning it was speedily echoed around that the amiable and gentle young villager had been found dead outside his father's door, which he had apparently been in the act of unlocking when he fell. The circumstances were sufficiently exceptional to justify an inquest, at which syncope from heart-disease was ascertained to be beyond doubt the explanation of his death, and no more was said about the matter then. But, after the funeral, it was rumoured that some man who had been returning late from a distant horse-fair had seen in the gloom of night a person, apparently a woman, dragging a heavy body of some sort towards the cottage-gate, which, by the light of after events, would seem to have been the corpse of the young fellow. His clothes were thereupon examined more particularly than at first, with the result that marks of friction were visible upon them here and there, precisely resembling such as would be left by dragging on the ground.

Our beautiful and ingenious Lady Caroline was now in great consternation; and began to think that, after all, it might have been better to honestly confess the truth. But having reached this stage without discovery or

suspicion, she determined to make another effort towards concealment; and a bright idea struck her as a means of securing it. I think I mentioned that, before she cast eyes on the unfortunate steward's clerk, he had been the beloved of a certain village damsel, the woodman's daughter, his neighbour, to whom he had paid some attentions; and possibly he was beloved of her still. At any rate, the Lady Caroline's influence on the estates of her father being considerable, she resolved to seek an interview with the young girl in furtherance of her plan to save her reputation, about which she was now exceedingly anxious; for by this time, the fit being over, she began to be ashamed of her mad passion for her late husband, and almost wished she had never seen him.

In the course of her parish-visiting she lighted on the young girl without much difficulty, and found her looking pale and sad, and wearing a simple black gown, which she had put on out of respect for the young man's memory, whom she had tenderly loved, though he had not loved her.

'Ah, you have lost your lover, Milly,' said Lady Caroline.

The young woman could not repress her tears. 'My lady, he was not quite my lover,' she said. 'But I was his--and now he is dead I don't care to live any more!'

'Can you keep a secret about him?' asks the lady; 'one in which his honour is involved--which is known to me alone, but should be known to you?'



The girl readily promised, and, indeed, could be safely trusted on such a subject, so deep was her affection for the youth she mourned.

'Then meet me at his grave to-night, half-an-hour after sunset, and I will tell it to you,' says the other.

In the dusk of that spring evening the two shadowy figures of the young women converged upon the assistant-steward's newly-turfed mound; and at that solemn place and hour, the one of birth and beauty unfolded her tale: how she had loved him and married him secretly; how he had died in her chamber; and how, to keep her secret, she had dragged him to his own door.

'Married him, my lady!' said the rustic maiden, starting back.

'I have said so,' replied Lady Caroline. 'But it was a mad thing, and a mistaken course. He ought to have married you. You, Milly, were peculiarly his. But you lost him.'

'Yes,' said the poor girl; 'and for that they laughed at me. "Ha--ha, you mid love him, Milly," they said; "but he will not love you!"'

'Victory over such unkind jeerers would be sweet,' said Lady Caroline. 'You lost him in life; but you may have him in death as if you had had him in life; and so turn the tables upon them.'

'How?' said the breathless girl.

The young lady then unfolded her plan, which was that Milly should go forward and declare that the young man had contracted a secret marriage (as he truly had done); that it was with her, Milly, his sweetheart; that he had been visiting her in her cottage on the evening of his death; when, on finding he was a corpse, she had carried him to his house to prevent discovery by her parents, and that she had meant to keep the whole matter a secret till the rumours afloat had forced it from her.

'And how shall I prove this?' said the woodman's daughter, amazed at the boldness of the proposal.

'Quite sufficiently. You can say, if necessary, that you were married to him at the church of St. Michael, in Bath City, in my name, as the first that occurred to you, to escape detection. That was where he married me. I will support you in this.'

'Oh--I don't quite like--'

'If you will do so,' said the lady peremptorily, 'I will always be your father's friend and yours; if not, it will be otherwise. And I will give you my wedding-ring, which you shall wear as yours.'

'Have you worn it, my lady?'

'Only at night.'

There was not much choice in the matter, and Milly consented. Then this noble lady took from her bosom the ring she had never been able openly to exhibit, and, grasping the young girl's hand, slipped it upon her finger as she stood upon her lover's grave.

Milly shivered, and bowed her head, saying, 'I feel as if I had become a corpse's bride!'

But from that moment the maiden was heart and soul in the substitution. A blissful repose came over her spirit. It seemed to her that she had secured in death him whom in life she had vainly idolized; and she was almost content. After that the lady handed over to the young man's new wife all the little mementoes and trinkets he had given herself; even to a locket containing his hair.

The next day the girl made her so-called confession, which the simple mourning she had already worn, without stating for whom, seemed to bear out; and soon the story of the little romance spread through the village and country-side, almost as far as Melchester. It was a curious psychological fact that, having once made the avowal, Milly seemed possessed with a spirit of ecstasy at her position. With the liberal sum of money supplied to her by Lady Caroline she now purchased the garb of a widow, and duly appeared at church in her weeds, her simple face looking

so sweet against its margin of crape that she was almost envied her state by the other village-girls of her age. And when a woman's sorrow for her beloved can maim her young life so obviously as it had done Milly's there was, in truth, little subterfuge in the case. Her explanation tallied so well with the details of her lover's latter movements--those strange absences and sudden returnings, which had occasionally puzzled his friends--that nobody supposed for a moment that the second actor in these secret nuptials was other than she. The actual and whole truth would indeed have seemed a preposterous assertion beside this plausible one, by reason of the lofty demeanour of the Lady Caroline and the unassuming habits of the late villager. There being no inheritance in question, not a soul took the trouble to go to the city church, forty miles off, and search the registers for marriage signatures bearing out so humble a romance.

In a short time Milly caused a decent tombstone to be erected over her nominal husband's grave, whereon appeared the statement that it was placed there by his heartbroken widow, which, considering that the payment for it came from Lady Caroline and the grief from Milly, was as truthful as such inscriptions usually are, and only required pluralizing to render it yet more nearly so.

The impressionable and complaisant Milly, in her character of widow, took delight in going to his grave every day, and indulging in sorrow which was a positive luxury to her. She placed fresh flowers on his grave, and so keen was her emotional imaginativeness that she almost believed

herself to have been his wife indeed as she walked to and fro in her garb of woe. One afternoon, Milly being busily engaged in this labour of love at the grave, Lady Caroline passed outside the churchyard wall with some of her visiting friends, who, seeing Milly there, watched her actions with interest, remarked upon the pathos of the scene, and upon the intense affection the young man must have felt for such a tender creature as Milly. A strange light, as of pain, shot from the Lady Caroline's eye, as if for the first time she begrudged to the young girl the position she had been at such pains to transfer to her; it showed that a slumbering affection for her husband still had life in Lady Caroline, obscured and stifled as it was by social considerations.

An end was put to this smooth arrangement by the sudden appearance in the churchyard one day of the Lady Caroline, when Milly had come there on her usual errand of laying flowers. Lady Caroline had been anxiously awaiting her behind the chancel, and her countenance was pale and agitated.

'Milly!' she said, 'come here! I don't know how to say to you what I am going to say. I am half dead!'

'I am sorry for your ladyship,' says Milly, wondering.

'Give me that ring!' says the lady, snatching at the girl's left hand.

Milly drew it quickly away.

'I tell you give it to me!' repeated Caroline, almost fiercely. 'Oh--but you don't know why? I am in a grief and a trouble I did not expect!' And Lady Caroline whispered a few words to the girl.

'O my lady!' said the thunderstruck Milly. 'What will you do?'

'You must say that your statement was a wicked lie, an invention, a scandal, a deadly sin--that I told you to make it to screen me! That it was I whom he married at Bath. In short, we must tell the truth, or I am ruined--body, mind, and reputation--for ever!'

But there is a limit to the flexibility of gentle-souled women. Milly by this time had so grown to the idea of being one flesh with this young man, of having the right to bear his name as she bore it; had so thoroughly come to regard him as her husband, to dream of him as her husband, to speak of him as her husband, that she could not relinquish him at a moment's peremptory notice.

'No, no,' she said desperately, 'I cannot, I will not give him up! Your ladyship took him away from me alive, and gave him back to me only when he was dead. Now I will keep him! I am truly his widow. More truly than you, my lady! for I love him and mourn for him, and call myself by his dear name, and your ladyship does neither!'

'I do love him!' cries Lady Caroline with flashing eyes, 'and I cling to him, and won't let him go to such as you! How can I, when he is the father of this poor babe that's coming to me? I must have him back again! Milly, Milly, can't you pity and understand me, perverse girl that you are, and the miserable plight that I am in? Oh, this precipitancy--it is the ruin of women! Why did I not consider, and wait! Come, give me back all that I have given you, and assure me you will support me in confessing the truth!'

'Never, never!' persisted Milly, with woe-begone passionateness. 'Look at this headstone! Look at my gown and bonnet of crape--this ring: listen to the name they call me by! My character is worth as much to me as yours is to you! After declaring my Love mine, myself his, taking his name, making his death my own particular sorrow, how can I say it was not so? No such dishonour for me! I will outswear you, my lady; and I shall be believed. My story is so much the more likely that yours will be thought false. But, O please, my lady, do not drive me to this! In pity let me keep him!'

The poor nominal widow exhibited such anguish at a proposal which would have been truly a bitter humiliation to her, that Lady Caroline was warmed to pity in spite of her own condition.

'Yes, I see your position,' she answered. 'But think of mine! What can I do? Without your support it would seem an invention to save me from disgrace; even if I produced the register, the love of scandal in the

world is such that the multitude would slur over the fact, say it was a fabrication, and believe your story. I do not know who were the witnesses, or anything!

In a few minutes these two poor young women felt, as so many in a strait have felt before, that union was their greatest strength, even now; and they consulted calmly together. The result of their deliberations was that Milly went home as usual, and Lady Caroline also, the latter confessing that very night to the Countess her mother of the marriage, and to nobody else in the world. And, some time after, Lady Caroline and her mother went away to London, where a little while later still they were joined by Milly, who was supposed to have left the village to proceed to a watering-place in the North for the benefit of her health, at the expense of the ladies of the Manor, who had been much interested in her state of lonely and defenceless widowhood.

Early the next year the widow Milly came home with an infant in her arms, the family at the Manor House having meanwhile gone abroad. They did not return from their tour till the autumn ensuing, by which time Milly and the child had again departed from the cottage of her father the woodman, Milly having attained to the dignity of dwelling in a cottage of her own, many miles to the eastward of her native village; a comfortable little allowance had moreover been settled on her and the child for life, through the instrumentality of Lady Caroline and her mother.

Two or three years passed away, and the Lady Caroline married a



nobleman--the Marquis of Stonehenge--considerably her senior, who had wooed her long and phlegmatically. He was not rich, but she led a placid life with him for many years, though there was no child of the marriage. Meanwhile Milly's boy, as the youngster was called, and as Milly herself considered him, grew up, and thrived wonderfully, and loved her as she deserved to be loved for her devotion to him, in whom she every day traced more distinctly the lineaments of the man who had won her girlish heart, and kept it even in the tomb.

She educated him as well as she could with the limited means at her disposal, for the allowance had never been increased, Lady Caroline, or the Marchioness of Stonehenge as she now was, seeming by degrees to care little what had become of them. Milly became extremely ambitious on the boy's account; she pinched herself almost of necessaries to send him to the Grammar School in the town to which they retired, and at twenty he enlisted in a cavalry regiment, joining it with a deliberate intent of making the Army his profession, and not in a freak of idleness. His exceptional attainments, his manly bearing, his steady conduct, speedily won him promotion, which was furthered by the serious war in which this country was at that time engaged. On his return to England after the peace he had risen to the rank of riding-master, and was soon after advanced another stage, and made quartermaster, though still a young man.

His mother--his corporeal mother, that is, the Marchioness of Stonehenge--heard tidings of this unaided progress; it reawakened her

maternal instincts, and filled her with pride. She became keenly interested in her successful soldier-son; and as she grew older much wished to see him again, particularly when, the Marquis dying, she was left a solitary and childless widow. Whether or not she would have gone to him of her own impulse I cannot say; but one day, when she was driving in an open carriage in the outskirts of a neighbouring town, the troops lying at the barracks hard by passed her in marching order. She eyed them narrowly, and in the finest of the horsemen recognized her son from his likeness to her first husband.

This sight of him doubly intensified the motherly emotions which had lain dormant in her for so many years, and she wildly asked herself how she could so have neglected him? Had she possessed the true courage of affection she would have owned to her first marriage, and have reared him as her son! What would it have mattered if she had never obtained this precious coronet of pearls and gold leaves, by comparison with the gain of having the love and protection of such a noble and worthy son? These and other sad reflections cut the gloomy and solitary lady to the heart; and she repented of her pride in disclaiming her first husband more bitterly than she had ever repented of her infatuation in marrying him.

Her yearning was so strong, that at length it seemed to her that she could not live without announcing herself to him as his mother. Come what might, she would do it: late as it was, she would have him away from that woman whom she began to hate with the fierceness of a deserted heart, for having taken her place as the mother of her only child. She

felt confidently enough that her son would only too gladly exchange a cottage-mother for one who was a peeress of the realm. Being now, in her widowhood, free to come and go as she chose, without question from anybody, Lady Stonehenge started next day for the little town where Milly yet lived, still in her robes of sable for the lost lover of her youth.

'He is my son,' said the Marchioness, as soon as she was alone in the cottage with Milly. 'You must give him back to me, now that I am in a position in which I can defy the world's opinion. I suppose he comes to see you continually?'

'Every month since he returned from the war, my lady. And sometimes he stays two or three days, and takes me about seeing sights everywhere!' She spoke with quiet triumph.

'Well, you will have to give him up,' said the Marchioness calmly. 'It shall not be the worse for you--you may see him when you choose. I am going to avow my first marriage, and have him with me.'

'You forget that there are two to be reckoned with, my lady. Not only me, but himself.'

'That can be arranged. You don't suppose that he wouldn't--' But not wishing to insult Milly by comparing their positions, she said, 'He is my own flesh and blood, not yours.'

'Flesh and blood's nothing!' said Milly, flashing with as much scorn as a cottager could show to a peeress, which, in this case, was not so little as may be supposed. 'But I will agree to put it to him, and let him settle it for himself.'

'That's all I require,' said Lady Stonehenge. 'You must ask him to come, and I will meet him here.'

The soldier was written to, and the meeting took place. He was not so much astonished at the disclosure of his parentage as Lady Stonehenge had been led to expect, having known for years that there was a little mystery about his birth. His manner towards the Marchioness, though respectful, was less warm than she could have hoped. The alternatives as to his choice of a mother were put before him. His answer amazed and stupefied her.

'No, my lady,' he said. 'Thank you much, but I prefer to let things be as they have been. My father's name is mine in any case. You see, my lady, you cared little for me when I was weak and helpless; why should I come to you now I am strong? She, dear devoted soul [pointing to Milly], tended me from my birth, watched over me, nursed me when I was ill, and deprived herself of many a little comfort to push me on. I cannot love another mother as I love her. She is my mother, and I will always be her son!' As he spoke he put his manly arm round Milly's neck, and kissed her with the tenderest affection.

The agony of the poor Marchioness was pitiable. 'You kill me!' she said, between her shaking sobs. 'Cannot you--love--me--too?'

'No, my lady. If I must say it, you were ashamed of my poor father, who was a sincere and honest man; therefore, I am ashamed of you.'

Nothing would move him; and the suffering woman at last gasped, 'Cannot--oh, cannot you give one kiss to me--as you did to her? It is not much--it is all I ask--all!'

'Certainly,' he replied.

He kissed her coldly, and the painful scene came to an end. That day was the beginning of death to the unfortunate Marchioness of Stonehenge. It was in the perverseness of her human heart that his denial of her should add fuel to the fire of her craving for his love. How long afterwards she lived I do not know with any exactness, but it was no great length of time. That anguish that is sharper than a serpent's tooth wore her out soon. Utterly reckless of the world, its ways, and its opinions, she allowed her story to become known; and when the welcome end supervened (which, I grieve to say, she refused to lighten by the consolations of religion), a broken heart was the truest phrase in which to sum up its cause.

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The rural dean having concluded, some observations upon his tale were made in due course. The sentimental member said that Lady Caroline's history afforded a sad instance of how an honest human affection will become shamefaced and mean under the frost of class-division and social prejudices. She probably deserved some pity; though her offspring, before he grew up to man's estate, had deserved more. There was no pathos like the pathos of childhood, when a child found itself in a world where it was not wanted, and could not understand the reason why. A tale by the speaker, further illustrating the same subject, though with different results from the last, naturally followed.