

CHAPTER X--"Yes--I have marked him"

Through the brilliant, happy year succeeding to his marriage my Lord of Dunstanwolde lived like a man who dreams a blissful dream and knows it is one.

"I feel," he said to his lady, "as if 'twere too great rapture to last, and yet what end could come, unless you ceased to be kind to me; and, in truth, I feel that you are too noble above all other women to change, unless I were more unworthy than I could ever be since you are mine."

Both in the town and in the country, which last place heard many things of his condition and estate through rumour, he was the man most wondered at and envied of his time--envied because of his strange happiness; wondered at because having, when long past youth, borne off this arrogant beauty from all other aspirants she showed no arrogance to him, and was as perfect a wife as could have been some woman without gifts whom he had

lifted from low estate and endowed with rank and fortune. She seemed both to respect himself and her position as his lady and spouse. Her manner of reigning in his household was among his many delights the greatest. It was a great house, and an old one, built long before by a Dunstanwolde whose lavish feasts and riotous banquets had been the notable feature of his life. It was curiously rambling in its structure. The rooms of entertainment were large and splendid, the halls and

staircases stately; below stairs there was space for an army of servants to be disposed of; and its network of cellars and wine-vaults was so beyond all need that more than one long arched stone passage was shut up as being without use, and but letting cold, damp air into corridors leading to the servants' quarters. It was, indeed, my Lady Dunstanwolde who had ordered the closing of this part when it had been her pleasure to be shown her domain by her housekeeper, the which had greatly awed and impressed her household as signifying that, exalted lady as she was, her wit was practical as well as brilliant, and that her eyes being open to her surroundings, she meant not that her lacqueys should rob her and her scullions filch, thinking that she was so high that she was ignorant of common things and blind.

"You will be well housed and fed and paid your dues," she said to them; "but the first man or woman who does a task ill or dishonestly will be turned from his place that hour. I deal justice--not mercy."

"Such a mistress they have never had before," said my lord when she related this to him. "Nay, they have never dreamed of such a lady--one who can be at once so severe and so kind. But there is none other such, my dearest one. They will fear and worship you."

She gave him one of her sweet, splendid smiles. It was the sweetness she at rare times gave her splendid smile which was her marvellous power.

"I would not be too grand a lady to be a good housewife," she said. "I

may not order your dinners, my dear lord, or sweep your corridors, but they shall know I rule your household and would rule it well."

"You are a goddess!" he cried, kneeling to her, enraptured. "And you have given yourself to a poor mortal man, who can but worship you."

"You give me all I have," she said, "and you love me nobly, and I am grateful."

Her assemblies were the most brilliant in the town, and the most to be desired entrance to. Wits and beauties planned and intrigued that they might be bidden to her house; beaux and fine ladies fell into the spleen if she neglected them. Her lord's kinsman the Duke of Osmonde, who had been present when she first knelt to Royalty, had scarce removed his eyes from her so long as he could gaze. He went to Dunstanwolde afterwards and congratulated him with stately courtesy upon his great good fortune and happiness, speaking almost with fire of her beauty and majesty, and thanking his kinsman that through him such perfections had been given to their name and house. From that time, at all special assemblies given by his kinsman he was present, the observed of all observers. He was a man of whom 'twas said that he was the most magnificent gentleman in Europe; that there was none to compare with him in the combination of gifts given both by Nature and Fortune. His beauty both of feature and carriage was of the greatest, his mind was of the highest, and his education far beyond that of the age he lived in. It was not the fashion of the day that men of his rank should devote themselves to the cultivation of their

intellects instead of to a life of pleasure; but this he had done from his earliest youth, and now, in his perfect though early maturity, he had no equal in polished knowledge and charm of bearing. He was the patron of literature and art; men of genius were not kept waiting in his antechamber, but were received by him with courtesy and honour. At the Court 'twas well known there was no man who stood so near the throne in favour, and that there was no union so exalted that he might not have made his suit as rather that of a superior than an equal. The Queen both loved and honoured him, and condescended to avow as much with gracious frankness. She knew no other man, she deigned to say, who was so worthy of honour and affection, and that he had not married must be because there was no woman who could meet him on ground that was equal. If there

were no scandals about him--and there were none--'twas not because he was

cold of heart or imagination. No man or woman could look into his deep eye and not know that when love came to him 'twould be a burning passion, and an evil fate if it went ill instead of happily.

"Being past his callow, youthful days, 'tis time he made some woman a duchess," Dunstanwolde said reflectively once to his wife. "'Twould be more fitting that he should; and it is his way to honour his house in all things, and bear himself without fault as the head of it. Methinks it strange he makes no move to do it."

"No, 'tis not strange," said my lady, looking under her black-fringed lids at the glow of the fire, as though reflecting also. "There is no

strangeness in it."

"Why not?" her lord asked.

"There is no mate for him," she answered slowly. "A man like him must mate as well as marry, or he will break his heart with silent raging at the weakness of the thing he is tied to. He is too strong and splendid for a common woman. If he married one, 'twould be as if a lion had taken to himself for mate a jackal or a sheep. Ah!" with a long drawn breath--"he would go mad--mad with misery;" and her hands, which lay upon her knee, wrung themselves hard together, though none could see it.

"He should have a goddess, were they not so rare," said Dunstanwolde, gently smiling. "He should hold a bitter grudge against me, that I, his unworthy kinsman, have been given the only one."

"Yes, he should have a goddess," said my lady slowly again; "and there are but women, naught but women."

"You have marked him well," said her lord, admiring her wisdom. "Methinks that you--though you have spoken to him but little, and have but of late become his kinswoman--have marked and read him better than the rest of us."

"Yes--I have marked him," was her answer.

"He is a man to mark, and I have a keen eye." She rose up as she spoke, and stood before the fire, lifted by some strong feeling to her fullest height, and towering there, splendid in the shadow--for 'twas by twilight they talked. "He is a Man," she said--"he is a Man! Nay, he is as God meant man should be. And if men were so, there would be women great enough for them to mate with and to give the world men like them." And but that she stood in the shadow, her lord would have seen the crimson torrent rush up her cheek and brow, and overspread her long round throat itself.

If none other had known of it, there was one man who knew that she had marked him, though she had borne herself towards him always with her stateliest grace. This man was his Grace the Duke himself. From the hour that he had stood transfixed as he watched her come up the broad oak stair, from the moment that the red rose fell from her wreath at his feet, and he had stooped to lift it in his hand, he had seen her as no other man had seen her, and he had known that had he not come but just too late, she would have been his own. Each time he had beheld her since that night he had felt this burn more deeply in his soul. He was too high and fine in all his thoughts to say to himself that in her he saw for the first time the woman who was his peer; but this was very truth--or might have been, if Fate had set her youth elsewhere, and a lady who was noble and her own mother had trained and guarded her. When he saw her at the Court surrounded, as she ever was, by a court of her own; when he saw

her reigning in her lord's house, receiving and doing gracious honour to his guests and hers; when she passed him in her coach, drawing every eye by the majesty of her presence, as she drove through the town, he felt a deep pang, which was all the greater that his honour bade him conquer it. He had no ignoble thought of her, he would have scorned to sully his soul with any light passion; to him she was the woman who might have been his beloved wife and duchess, who would have upheld with him the honour and traditions of his house, whose strength and power and beauty would have been handed down to his children, who so would have been born endowed with gifts befitting the state to which Heaven had called them. It was of this he thought when he saw her, and of naught less like to do her honour. And as he had marked her so, he saw in her eyes, despite her dignity and grace, she had marked him. He did not know how closely, or that she gave him the attention he could not restrain himself from bestowing upon her. But when he bowed before her, and she greeted him with all courtesy, he saw in her great, splendid eye that had Fate willed it so, she would have understood all his thoughts, shared all his ambitions, and aided him to uphold his high ideals. Nay, he knew she understood him even now, and was stirred by what stirred him also, even though they met but rarely, and when they encountered each other, spoke but as kinsman and kinswoman who would show each other all gracious respect and honour. It was because of this pang which struck his great heart at times that he was not a frequent visitor at my Lord Dunstanwolde's mansion, but appeared there only at such assemblies as were matters of ceremony, his absence from which would have been a noted thing. His kinsman was fond of him, and though himself of so much riper

age, honoured him greatly. At times he strove to lure him into visits of greater familiarity; but though his kindness was never met coldly or repulsed, a further intimacy was in some gracious way avoided.

"My lady must beguile you to be less formal with us," said Dunstanwolde. And later her ladyship spoke as her husband had privately desired: "My lord would be made greatly happy if your Grace would honour our house oftener," she said one night, when at the end of a great ball he was bidding her adieu.

Osmonde's deep eye met hers gently and held it. "My Lord Dunstanwolde is always gracious and warm of heart to his kinsman," he replied. "Do not let him think me discourteous or ungrateful. In truth, your ladyship, I am neither the one nor the other."

The eyes of each gazed into the other's steadfastly and gravely. The Duke of Osmonde thought of Juno's as he looked at hers; they were of such velvet, and held such fathomless deeps.

"Your Grace is not so free as lesser men," Clorinda said. "You cannot come and go as you would."

"No," he answered gravely, "I cannot, as I would."

And this was all.

It having been known by all the world that, despite her beauty and her conquests, Mistress Clorinda Wildairs had not smiled with great favour upon Sir John Oxon in the country, it was not wondered at or made any matter of gossip that the Countess of Dunstanwolde was but little familiar with him and saw him but rarely at her house in town.

Once or twice he had appeared there, it is true, at my Lord Dunstanwolde's instance, but my lady herself scarce seemed to see him after her first courtesies as hostess were over.

"You never smiled on him, my love," Dunstanwolde said to his wife. "You bore yourself towards him but cavalierly, as was your ladyship's way--with all but one poor servant," tenderly; "but he was one of the many who followed in your train, and if these gay young fellows stay away, 'twill be said that I keep them at a distance because I am afraid of their youth and gallantry. I would not have it fancied that I was so ungrateful as to presume upon your goodness and not leave to you your freedom."

"Nor would I, my lord," she answered. "But he will not come often; I do not love him well enough."

His marriage with the heiress who had wealth in the West Indies was broken off, or rather 'twas said had come to naught. All the town knew it, and wondered, and talked, because it had been believed at first that the young lady was much enamoured of him, and that he would soon lead her

to the altar, the which his creditors had greatly rejoiced over as promising them some hope that her fortune would pay their bills of which they had been in despair. Later, however, gossip said that the heiress had not been so tender as was thought; that, indeed, she had been found to be in love with another man, and that even had she not, she had heard such stories of Sir John as promised but little nuptial happiness for any woman that took him to husband.

When my Lord Dunstanwolde brought his bride to town, and she soared at once to splendid triumph and renown, inflaming every heart, and setting every tongue at work, clamouring her praises, Sir John Oxon saw her from afar in all the scenes of brilliant fashion she frequented and reigned queen of. 'Twas from afar, it might be said, he saw her only, though he was often near her, because she bore herself as if she did not observe him, or as though he were a thing which did not exist. The first time that she deigned to address him was upon an occasion when she found herself standing so near him at an assembly that in the crowd she brushed him with her robe. His blue eyes were fixed burningly upon her, and as she brushed him he drew in a hard breath, which she hearing, turned slowly and let her own eyes fall upon his face.

"You did not marry," she said.

"No, I did not marry," he answered, in a low, bitter voice. "'Twas your ladyship who did that."

She faintly, slowly smiled.

"I should not have been like to do otherwise," she said; "'tis an honourable condition. I would advise you to enter it."