

CHAPTER XX--A noble marriage

When the duke came back from France, and to pay his first eager visit to his bride that was to be, her ladyship's lacqueys led him not to the Panelled Parlour, but to a room which he had not entered before, it being one she had had the fancy to have remodelled and made into a beautiful closet for herself, her great wealth rendering it possible for her to accomplish changes without the loss of time the owners of limited purses are subjected to in the carrying out of plans. This room she had made as unlike the Panelled Parlour as two rooms would be unlike one another. Its panellings were white, its furnishings were bright and delicate, its draperies flowered with rosebuds tied in clusters with love-knots of pink and blue; it had a large bow-window, through which the sunlight streamed, and it was blooming with great rose-bowls overrunning with sweetness.

From a seat in the morning sunshine among the flowers and plants in the bow-window, there rose a tall figure in a snow-white robe--a figure like that of a beautiful stately girl who was half an angel. It was my lady, who came to him with blushing cheeks and radiant shining eyes, and was swept into his arms in such a passion of love and blessed tenderness as Heaven might have smiled to see.

"My love! my love!" he breathed. "My life! my life and soul!"

"My Gerald!" she cried. "My Gerald--let me say it on your breast a

thousand times!"

"My wife!" he said--"so soon my wife and all my own until life's end."

"Nay, nay," she cried, her cheek pressed to his own, "through all eternity, for Love's life knows no end."

As it had seemed to her poor lord who had died, so it seemed to this man who lived and so worshipped her--that the wonder of her sweetness was a thing to marvel at with passionate reverence. Being a man of greater mind and poetic imagination than Dunstanwolde, and being himself adored by her, as that poor gentleman had not had the good fortune to be, he had ten thousand-fold the power and reason to see the tender radiance of her. As she was taller than other women, so her love seemed higher and greater, and as free from any touch of earthly poverty of feeling as her beauty was from any flaw. In it there could be no doubt, no pride; it could be bounded by no limit, measured by no rule, its depths sounded by no plummet.

His very soul was touched by her great longing to give to him the feeling, and to feel herself, that from the hour that she had become his, her past life was a thing blotted out.

"I am a new created thing," she said; "until you called me 'Love' I had no life! All before was darkness. 'Twas you, my Gerald, who said, 'Let there be light, and there was light.'"

"Hush, hush, sweet love," he said. "Your words would make me too near God's self."

"Sure Love is God," she cried, her hands upon his shoulders, her face uplifted. "What else? Love we know; Love we worship and kneel to; Love conquers us and gives us Heaven. Until I knew it, I believed naught. Now I kneel each night and pray, and pray, but to be pardoned and made worthy."

Never before, it was true, had she knelt and prayed, but from this time no nun in her convent knelt oftener or prayed more ardently, and her prayer was ever that the past might be forgiven her, the future blessed, and she taught how to so live that there should be no faintest shadow in the years to come.

"I know not What is above me," she said. "I cannot lie and say I love It and believe, but if there is aught, sure It must be a power which is great, else had the world not been so strange a thing, and I--and those who live in it--and if He made us, He must know He is to blame when He has made us weak or evil. And He must understand why we have been so made, and when we throw ourselves into the dust before Him, and pray for help and pardon, surely--surely He will lend an ear! We know naught, we have been told naught; we have but an old book which has been handed down through strange hands and strange tongues, and may be but poor history.

We have so little, and we are threatened so; but for love's sake I will pray the poor prayers we are given, and for love's sake there is no dust too low for me to lie in while I plead."

This was the strange truth--though 'twas not so strange if the world feared not to admit such things--that through her Gerald, who was but noble and high-souled man, she was led to bow before God's throne as the humblest and holiest saint bows, though she had not learned belief and only had learned love.

"But life lasts so short a while," she said to Osmonde. "It seems so short when it is spent in such joy as this; and when the day comes--for, oh! Gerald, my soul sees it already--when the day comes that I kneel by your bedside and see your eyes close, or you kneel by mine, it must be that the one who waits behind shall know the parting is not all."

"It could not be all, beloved," Osmonde said. "Love is sure, eternal."

Often in these blissful hours her way was almost like a child's, she was so tender and so clinging. At times her beautiful, great eyes were full of an imploring which made them seem soft with tears, and thus they were now as she looked up at him.

"I will do all I can," she said. "I will obey every law, I will pray often and give alms, and strive to be dutiful and--holy, that in the end He will not thrust me from you; that I may stay near--even in the lowest

place, even in the lowest--that I may see your face and know that you see mine. We are so in His power, He can do aught with us; but I will so obey Him and so pray that He will let me in."

To Anne she went with curious humility, questioning her as to her religious duties and beliefs, asking her what books she read, and what services she attended.

"All your life you have been a religious woman," she said. "I used to think it folly, but now--"

"But now--" said Anne.

"I know not what to think," she answered. "I would learn."

But when she listened to Anne's simple homilies, and read her weighty sermons, they but made her restless and unsatisfied.

"Nay, 'tis not that," she said one day, with a deep sigh. "'Tis more than that; 'tis deeper, and greater, and your sermons do not hold it. They but set my brain to questioning and rebellion."

But a short time elapsed before the marriage was solemnised, and such a wedding the world of fashion had not taken part in for years, 'twas said. Royalty honoured it; the greatest of the land were proud to count themselves among the guests; the retainers, messengers, and company of

the two great houses were so numerous that in the west end of the town the streets wore indeed quite a festal air, with the passing to and fro of servants and gentlefolk with favours upon their arms.

'Twas to the Tower of Camylott, the most beautiful and remote of the bridegroom's several notable seats, that they removed their household, when the irksomeness of the extended ceremonies and entertainments were over--for these they were of too distinguished rank to curtail as lesser personages might have done. But when all things were over, the stately town houses closed, and their equipages rolled out beyond the sight of town into the country roads, the great duke and his great duchess sat hand in hand, gazing into each other's eyes with as simple and ardent a joy as they had been but young 'prentice and country maid, flying to hide from the world their love.

"There is no other woman who is so like a queen," Osmonde said, with tenderest smiling. "And yet your eyes wear a look so young in these days that they are like a child's. In all their beauty, I have never seen them so before."

"It is because I am a new created thing, as I have told you, love," she answered, and leaned towards him. "Do you not know I never was a child. I bring myself to you new born. Make of me then what a woman should be--to be beloved of husband and of God. Teach me, my Gerald. I am your child and servant."

"Twas ever thus, that her words when they were such as these were ended upon his breast as she was swept there by his impassioned arm. She was so goddess-like and beautiful a being, her life one strangely dominant and brilliant series of triumphs, and yet she came to him with such softness and humility of passion, that scarcely could he think himself a waking man.

"Surely," he said, "it is a thing too wondrous and too full of joy's splendour to be true."

In the golden afternoon, when the sun was deepening and mellowing towards its setting, they and their retinue entered Camylott. The bells pealed from the grey belfry of the old church; the villagers came forth in clean smocks and Sunday cloaks of scarlet, and stood in the street and by the roadside curtsying and baring their heads with rustic cheers; little country girls with red cheeks threw posies before the horses' feet, and into the equipage itself when they were of the bolder sort. Their chariot passed beneath archways of flowers and boughs, and from the battlements of the Tower of Camylott there floated a flag in the soft wind.

"God save your Graces," the simple people cried. "God give your Graces joy and long life! Lord, what a beautiful pair they be. And though her Grace was said to be a proud lady, how sweetly she smiles at a poor body. God love ye, madam! Madam, God love ye!"

Her Grace of Osmonde leaned forward in her equipage and smiled at the people with the face of an angel.

"I will teach them to love me, Gerald," she said. "I have not had love enough."

"Has not all the world loved you?" he said.

"Nay," she answered, "only you, and Dunstanwolde and Anne."

Late at night they walked together on the broad terrace before the Tower. The blue-black vault of heaven above them was studded with myriads of God's brilliants; below them was spread out the beauty of the land, the rolling plains, the soft low hills, the forests and moors folded and hidden in the swathing robe of the night; from the park and gardens floated upward the freshness of acres of thick sward and deep fern thicket, the fragrance of roses and a thousand flowers, the tender sighing of the wind through the huge oaks and beeches bordering the avenues, and reigning like kings over the seeming boundless grassy spaces.

As lovers have walked since the days of Eden they walked together, no longer duke and duchess, but man and woman--near to Paradise as human beings may draw until God breaks the chain binding them to earth; and, indeed, it would seem that such hours are given to the straining human

soul that it may know that somewhere perfect joy must be, since sometimes the gates are for a moment opened that Heaven's light may shine through, so that human eyes may catch glimpses of the white and golden glories within.

His arm held her, she leaned against him, their slow steps so harmonising the one with the other that they accorded with the harmony of music; the nightingales trilling and bubbling in the rose trees were not affrighted by the low murmur of their voices; perchance, this night they were so near to Nature that the barriers were o'erpassed, and they and the singers were akin.

"Oh! to be a woman," Clorinda murmured. "To be a woman at last. All other things I have been, and have been called 'Huntress,' 'Goddess,' 'Beauty,' 'Empress,' 'Conqueror,'--but never 'Woman.' And had our paths not crossed, I think I never could have known what 'twas to be one, for to be a woman one must close with the man who is one's mate. It must not be that one looks down, or only pities or protects and guides; and only to a few a mate seems given. And I--Gerald, how dare I walk thus at your side and feel your heart so beat near mine, and know you love me, and so worship you--so worship you--"

She turned and threw herself upon his breast, which was so near.

"Oh, woman! woman!" he breathed, straining her close. "Oh, woman who is mine, though I am but man."

"We are but one," she said; "one breath, one soul, one thought, and one desire. Were it not so, I were not woman and your wife, nor you man and my soul's lover as you are. If it were not so, we were still apart, though we were wedded a thousand times. Apart, what are we but like lopped-off limbs; welded together, we are--this." And for a moment they spoke not, and a nightingale on the rose vine, clambering o'er the terrace's balustrade, threw up its little head and sang as if to the myriads of golden stars. They stood and listened, hand in hand, her sweet breast rose and fell, her lovely face was lifted to the bespangled sky.

"Of all this," she said, "I am a part, as I am a part of you. To-night, as the great earth throbs, and as the stars tremble, and as the wind sighs, so I, being woman, throb and am tremulous and sigh also. The earth lives for the sun, and through strange mysteries blooms forth each season with fruits and flowers; love is my sun, and through its sacredness I may bloom too, and be as noble as the earth and that it bears."