

CHAPTER XXI--An heir is born

In a fair tower whose windows looked out upon spreading woods, and rich lovely plains stretching to the freshness of the sea, Mistress Anne had her abode which her duchess sister had given to her for her own living in as she would. There she dwelt and prayed and looked on the new life which so beautifully unfolded itself before her day by day, as the leaves of a great tree unfold from buds and become noble branches, housing birds and their nests, shading the earth and those sheltering beneath them, braving centuries of storms.

To this simile her simple mind oft reverted, for indeed it seemed to her that naught more perfect and more noble in its high likeness to pure Nature and the fulfilling of God's will than the passing days of these two lives could be.

"As the first two lived--Adam and Eve in their garden of Eden--they seem to me," she used to say to her own heart; "but the Tree of Knowledge was not forbidden them, and it has taught them naught ignoble."

As she had been wont to watch her sister from behind the ivy of her chamber windows, so she often watched her now, though there was no fear in her hiding, only tenderness, it being a pleasure to her full of wonder and reverence to see this beautiful and stately pair go lovingly and in high and gentle converse side by side, up and down the terrace, through

the paths, among the beds of flowers, under the thick branched trees and over the sward's softness.

"It is as if I saw Love's self, and dwelt with it--the love God's nature made," she said, with gentle sighs.

For if these two had been great and beautiful before, it seemed in these days as if life and love glowed within them, and shone through their mere bodies as a radiant light shines through alabaster lamps. The strength of each was so the being of the other that no thought could take form in the brain of one without the other's stirring with it.

"Neither of us dare be ignoble," Osmonde said, "for 'twould make poor and base the one who was not so in truth."

"'Twas not the way of my Lady Dunstanwolde to make a man feel that he stood in church," a frivolous court wit once said, "but in sooth her Grace of Osmonde has a look in her lustrous eyes which accords not with scandalous stories and playhouse jests."

And true it was that when they went to town they carried with them the illumining of the pure fire which burned within their souls, and bore it all unknowing in the midst of the trivial or designing world, which knew not what it was that glowed about them, making things bright which had seemed dull, and revealing darkness where there had been brilliant glare.

They returned not to the house which had been my Lord of Dunstanwolde's, but went to the duke's own great mansion, and there lived splendidly and in hospitable state. Royalty honoured them, and all the wits came there, some of those gentlemen who writ verses and dedications being by no means averse to meeting noble lords and ladies, and finding in their loves and graces material which might be useful. 'Twas not only Mr. Addison and Mr. Steele, Dr. Swift and Mr. Pope, who were made welcome in the stately rooms, but others who were more humble, not yet having won their spurs, and how these worshipped her Grace for the generous kindness which was not the fashion, until she set it, among great ladies, their odes and verses could scarce express.

"They are so poor," she said to her husband. "They are so poor, and yet in their starved souls there is a thing which can less bear flouting than the dull content which rules in others. I know not whether 'tis a curse or a boon to be born so. 'Tis a bitter thing when the bird that flutters in them has only little wings. All the more should those who are strong protect and comfort them."

She comforted so many creatures. In strange parts of the town, where no other lady would have dared to go to give alms, it was rumoured that she went and did noble things privately. In dark kennels, where thieves hid and vagrants huddled, she carried her beauty and her stateliness, the which when they shone on the poor rogues and victims housed there seemed like the beams of the warm and golden sun.

Once in a filthy hovel in a black alley she came upon a poor girl dying of a loathsome ill, and as she stood by her bed of rags she heard in her delirium the uttering of one man's name again and again, and when she questioned those about she found that the sufferer had been a little country wench enticed to town by this man for a plaything, and in a few weeks cast off to give birth to a child in the almshouse, and then go down to the depths of vice in the kennel.

"What is the name she says?" her Grace asked the hag nearest to her, and least maudlin with liquor. "I would be sure I heard it aright."

"'Tis the name of a gentleman, your ladyship may be sure," the beldam answered; "'tis always the name of a gentleman. And this is one I know well, for I have heard more than one poor soul mumbling it and raving at him in her last hours. One there was, and I knew her, a pretty rosy thing in her country days, not sixteen, and distraught with love for him, and lay in the street by his door praying him to take her back when he threw her off, until the watch drove her away. And she was so mad with love and grief she killed her girl child when 'twas born i' the kennel, sobbing and crying that it should not live to be like her and bear others. And she was condemned to death, and swung for it on Tyburn Tree. And, Lord! how she cried his name as she jolted on her coffin to the gallows, and when the hangman put the rope round her shuddering little fair neck. 'Oh, John,' screams she, 'John Oxon, God forgive thee! Nay, 'tis God should be forgiven for letting thee to live and me to die like

this.' Aye, 'twas a bitter sight! She was so little and so young, and so affrighted. The hangman could scarce hold her. I was i' the midst o' the crowd and cried to her to strive to stand still, 'twould be the sooner over. But that she could not. 'Oh, John,' she screams, 'John Oxon, God forgive thee! Nay, 'tis God should be forgiven for letting thee to live and me to die like this!'"

Till the last hour of the poor creature who lay before her when she heard this thing, her Grace of Osmonde saw that she was tended, took her from her filthy hovel, putting her in a decent house and going to her day by day, until she received her last breath, holding her hand while the poor wench lay staring up at her beauteous face and her great deep eyes, whose lustrousness held such power to sustain, protect, and comfort.

"Be not afraid, poor soul," she said, "be not afraid. I will stay near thee. Soon all will end in sleep, and if thou wakest, sure there will be Christ who died, and wipes all tears away. Hear me say it to thee for a prayer," and she bent low and said it soft and clear into the deadening ear, "He wipes all tears away--He wipes all tears away."

The great strength she had used in the old days to conquer and subdue, to win her will and to defend her way, seemed now a power but to protect the suffering and uphold the weak, and this she did, not alone in hovels but in the brilliant court and world of fashion, for there she found suffering and weakness also, all the more bitter and sorrowful since it dared not cry aloud. The grandeur of her beauty, the elevation of her

rank, the splendour of her wealth would have made her a protector of great strength, but that which upheld all those who turned to her was that which dwelt within the high soul of her, the courage and power of love for all things human which bore upon itself, as if upon an eagle's outspread wings, the woes dragging themselves broken and halting upon earth. The starving beggar in the kennel felt it, and, not knowing wherefore, drew a longer, deeper breath, as if of purer, more exalted air; the poor poet in his garret was fed by it, and having stood near or spoken to her, went back to his lair with lightening eyes and soul warmed to believe that the words his Muse might speak the world might stay to hear.

From the hour she stayed the last moments of John Oxon's victim she set herself a work to do. None knew it but herself at first, and later Anne, for 'twas done privately. From the hag who had told her of the poor girl's hanging upon Tyburn Tree, she learned things by close questioning, which to the old woman's dull wit seemed but the curiousness of a great lady, and from others who stood too deep in awe of her to think of her as a mere human being, she gathered clues which led her far in the tracing of the evils following one wicked, heartless life. Where she could hear of man, woman, or child on whom John Oxon's sins had fallen, or who had suffered wrong by him, there she went to help, to give light, to give comfort and encouragement. Strangely, as it seemed to them, and as if done by the hand of Heaven, the poor tradesmen he had robbed were paid their dues, youth he had led into evil ways was checked mysteriously and set in better paths; women he had dragged downward were given aid and

chance of peace or happiness; children he had cast upon the world, unfathered, and with no prospect but the education of the gutter, and a life of crime, were cared for by a powerful unseen hand. The pretty country girl saved by his death, protected by her Grace, and living innocently at Dunstanwolde, memory being merciful to youth, forgot him, gained back her young roses, and learned to smile and hope as though he had been but a name.

"Since 'twas I who killed him," said her Grace to her inward soul, "'tis I must live his life which I took from him, and making it better I may be forgiven--if there is One who dares to say to the poor thing He made, 'I will not forgive.'"

Surely it was said there had never been lives so beautiful and noble as those the Duke of Osmonde and his lady lived as time went by. The Tower of Camylott, where they had spent the first months of their wedded life, they loved better than any other of their seats, and there they spent as much time as their duties of Court and State allowed them. It was indeed a splendid and beautiful estate, the stately tower being built upon an eminence, and there rolling out before it the most lovely land in England, moorland and hills, thick woods and broad meadows, the edge of the heather dipping to show the soft silver of the sea.

Here was this beauteous woman chatelaine and queen, wife of her husband as never before, he thought, had wife blessed and glorified the existence of mortal man. All her great beauty she gave to him in tender, joyous

tribute; all her great gifts of mind and wit and grace it seemed she valued but as they were joys to him; in his stately households in town and country she reigned a lovely empress, adored and obeyed with reverence by every man or woman who served her and her lord. Among the people on his various estates she came and went a tender goddess of benevolence. When she appeared amid them in the first months of her wedded life, the humble souls regarded her with awe not unmixed with fear, having heard such wild stories of her youth at her father's house, and of her proud state and bitter wit in the great London world when she had been my Lady Dunstanwolde; but when she came among them all else was forgotten in their wonder at her graciousness and noble way.

"To see her come into a poor body's cottage, so tall and grand a lady, and with such a carriage as she hath," they said, hobnobbing together in their talk of her, "looking as if a crown of gold should sit on her high black head, and then to hear her gentle speech and see the look in her eyes as if she was but a simple new-married girl, full of her joy, and her heart big with the wish that all other women should be as happy as herself, it is, forsooth, a beauteous sight to see."

"Ay, and no hovel too poor for her, and no man or woman too sinful," was said again.

"Heard ye how she found that poor wench of Haylits lying sobbing among the fern in the Tower woods, and stayed and knelt beside her to hear her

trouble? The poor soul has gone to ruin at fourteen, and her father, finding her out, beat her and thrust her from his door, and her Grace coming through the wood at sunset--it being her way to walk about for mere pleasure as though she had no coach to ride in--the girl says she came through the golden glow as if she had been one of God's angels--and she kneeled and took the poor wench in her arms--as strong as a man, Betty says, but as soft as a young mother--and she said to her things surely no mortal lady ever said before--that she knew naught of a surety of what God's true will might be, or if His laws were those that have been made by man concerning marriage by priests saying common words, but that she surely knew of a man whose name was Christ, and He had taught love and helpfulness and pity, and for His sake, He having earned our trust in Him, whether He was God or man, because He hung and died in awful torture on the Cross--for His sake all of us must love and help and pity--'I you, poor Betty,' were her very words, 'and you me.' And then she went to the girl's father and mother, and so talked to them that she brought them to weeping, and begging Betty to come home; and also she went to her sweetheart, Tom Beck, and made so tender a story to him of the poor pretty wench whose love for him had brought her to such trouble, that she stirred him up to falling in love again, which is not man's way at such times, and in a week's time he and Betty went to church together, her Grace setting them up in a cottage on the estate."

"I used all my wit and all my tenderest words to make a picture that would fire and touch him, Gerald," her Grace said, sitting at her

husband's side, in a great window, from which they often watched the sunset in the valley spread below; "and that with which I am so strong sometimes--I know not what to call it, but 'tis a power people bend to, that I know--that I used upon him to waken his dull soul and brain. Whose fault is it that they are dull? Poor lout, he was born so, as I was born strong and passionate, and as you were born noble and pure and high. I led his mind back to the past, when he had been made happy by the sight of Betty's little smiling, blushing face, and when he had kissed her and made love in the hayfields. And this I said--though 'twas not a thing I have learned from any chaplain--that when 'twas said he should make an honest woman of her, it was my thought that she had been honest from the first, being too honest to know that the world was not so, and that even the man a woman loved with all her soul, might be a rogue, and have no honesty in him. And at last--'twas when I talked to him about the child--and that I put my whole soul's strength in--he burst out a-crying like a schoolboy, and said indeed she was a fond little thing and had loved him, and he had loved her, and 'twas a shame he had so done by her, and he had not meant it at the first, but she was so simple, and he had been a villain, but if he married her now, he would be called a fool, and laughed at for his pains. Then was I angry, Gerald, and felt my eyes flash, and I stood up tall and spoke fiercely: 'Let them dare,' I said--'let any man or woman dare, and then will they see what his Grace will say.'"

Osmonde drew her to his breast, laughing into her lovely eyes.

"Nay, 'tis not his Grace who need be called on," he said; "'tis her Grace they love and fear, and will obey; though 'tis the sweetest, womanish thing that you should call on me when you are power itself, and can so rule all creatures you come near."

"Nay," she said, with softly pleading face, "let me not rule. Rule for me, or but help me; I so long to say your name that they may know I speak but as your wife."

"Who is myself," he answered--"my very self."

"Ay," she said, with a little nod of her head, "that I know--that I am yourself; and 'tis because of this that one of us cannot be proud with the other, for there is no other, there is only one. And I am wrong to say, 'Let me not rule,' for 'tis as if I said, 'You must not rule.' I meant surely, 'God give me strength to be as noble in ruling as our love should make me.' But just as one tree is a beech and one an oak, just as the grass stirs when the summer wind blows over it, so a woman is a woman, and 'tis her nature to find her joy in saying such words to the man who loves her, when she loves as I do. Her heart is so full that she must joy to say her husband's name as that of one she cannot think without--who is her life as is her blood and her pulses beating. 'Tis a joy to say your name, Gerald, as it will be a joy"--and she looked far out across the sun-goldened valley and plains, with a strange, heavenly sweet smile--"as it will be a joy to say our child's--and put his little mouth to my full breast."

"Sweet love," he cried, drawing her by the hand that he might meet the radiance of her look--"heart's dearest!"

She did not withhold her lovely eyes from him, but withdrew them from the sunset's mist of gold, and the clouds piled as it were at the gates of heaven, and they seemed to bring back some of the far-off glory with them. Indeed, neither her smile nor she seemed at that moment to be things of earth. She held out her fair, noble arms, and he sprang to her, and so they stood, side beating against side.

"Yes, love," she said--"yes, love--and I have prayed, my Gerald, that I may give you sons who shall be men like you. But when I give you women children, I shall pray with all my soul for them--that they may be just and strong and noble, and life begin for them as it began not for me."

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In the morning of a spring day when the cuckoos cried in the woods, and May blossomed thick, white and pink, in all the hedges, the bells in the grey church-steeple at Camylott rang out a joyous, jangling peal, telling all the village that the heir had been born at the Tower. Children stopped in their play to listen, men at their work in field and barn; good gossips ran out of their cottage door, wiping their arms dry, from their tubs and scrubbing-buckets, their honest red faces broadening into maternal grins.

"Ay, 'tis well over, that means surely," one said to the other; "and a happy day has begun for the poor lady--though God knows she bore herself queenly to the very last, as if she could have carried her burden for another year, and blenched not a bit as other women do. Bless mother and child, say I."

"And 'tis an heir," said another. "She promised us that we should know almost as quick as she did, and commanded old Rowe to ring a peal, and then strike one bell loud between if 'twere a boy, and two if 'twere a girl child. 'Tis a boy, heard you, and 'twas like her wit to invent such a way to tell us."

In four other villages the chimes rang just as loud and merrily, and the women talked, and blessed her Grace and her young child, and casks of ale were broached, and oxen roasted, and work stopped, and dancers footed it upon the green.

"Surely the new-born thing comes here to happiness," 'twas said everywhere, "for never yet was woman loved as is his mother."

In her stately bed her Grace the duchess lay, with the face of the Mother Mary, and her man-child drinking from her breast. The duke walked softly up and down, so full of joy that he could not sit still. When he had entered first, it was his wife's self who had sate upright in her bed, and herself laid his son within his arms.

"None other shall lay him there," she said, "I have given him to you. He is a great child, but he has not taken from me my strength."

He was indeed a great child, even at his first hour, of limbs and countenance so noble that nurses and physicians regarded him amazed. He was the offspring of a great love, of noble bodies and great souls. Did such powers alone create human beings, the earth would be peopled with a race of giants.

Amid the veiled spring sunshine and the flower-scented silence, broken only by the twittering of birds nesting in the ivy, her Grace lay soft asleep, her son resting on her arm, when Anne stole to look at her and her child. Through the night she had knelt praying in her chamber, and now she knelt again. She kissed the new-born thing's curled rose-leaf hand and the lace frill of his mother's night-rail. She dared not further disturb them.

"Sure God forgives," she breathed--"for Christ's sake. He would not give this little tender thing a punishment to bear."