

His Grace of Osmonde

By

Frances Hodgson Burnett

HIS GRACE OF OSMONDE

CHAPTER I

The Fifth Day of April, 1676

Upon the village of Camylott there had rested since the earliest peep of dawn a hush of affectionate and anxious expectancy, the very plough-boys going about their labours without boisterous laughter, the children playing quietly, and the good wives in their kitchens and dairies bustling less than usual and modulating the sharpness of their voices, the most motherly among them in truth finding themselves falling into whispering as they gossiped of the great subject of the hour.

"The swallows were but just beginning to stir and twitter in their nests under the eaves when I heard the horses' hoofs a-clatter on the high road," said Dame Watt to her neighbour as they stood in close confab in her small front garden. "Lord's mercy! though I have lain down expecting it every night for a week, the heart of me leapt up in my throat and I jounced Gregory with a thump in his back to wake him from his snoring. 'Gregory,' cries I, 'tis sure begun. God be kind to her young Grace this day. There goes a messenger clattering over the road. Hearken to his horse's feet.'"

Dame Bush, her neighbour, being the good mother of fourteen stalwart boys and girls, heaved a lusty sigh, the sound of which was a thing suggesting much experience and fellow-feeling even with noble ladies at such times.

"There is not a woman's heart in Camylott village," said she, "which doth not beat for her to-day--and for his Grace and the heir or heiress that will come of these hours of hers. God bless all three!"

"Lord, how the tiny thing hath been loved and waited for!" said Dame Watt. "'Tis somewhat to be born a great Duke's child! And how its mother hath been cherished and kept like a young saint in a shrine!"

"If 'tis not a great child and a beauteous one 'twill be a wondrous thing, its parents being both beautiful and happy, and both deep in love," quoth motherly Bush.

"Ay, it beginneth well; it beginneth well," said Dame Watt--"a being born to wealth and state. What with chaplains and governors of virtue and learning, there seemeth no way for it to go astray in life or grow to aught but holy greatness. It should be the finest duke or duchess in all England some day, surely."

"Heaven ordains a fair life for some new-born things, 'twould seem," said Bush, "and a black one for others; and the good can no more be

escaped than the bad. There goes my Matthew in his ploughboy's smock across the fields. 'Tis a good lad and a handsome. Why was he not a great lord's son?"

Neighbour Watt laughed.

"Because thou wert an honest woman and not a beauty," quoth she.

The small black eyes set deep in Bush's broad red face twinkled somewhat at the rough jest, but not in hearty mirth. She rubbed her hand across her mouth with an awkward gesture.

"Ay," answered she, "but 'twas not that I meant. I thought of all this child is born to--love and wealth and learning--and that others are born to naught but ill."

"Lawk! let us not even speak of ill on such a day," said her neighbour.

"Look at the sky's blueness and the spring bursting forth in every branch and clod--and the very skylarks singing hard as if for joy."

"Ay," said Joan Bush, "and look up village street to the Plough Horse, and see thy Gregory and my Will and their mates pouring down ale to drink a health to it--and to her Grace and to my lord Duke, and to the fine Court doctors, and to the nurses, and to the Chaplain, and to old Rowe who waits about to be ready to ring a peal on the church bells. They'll find toasts enough, I warrant."

"That will they," said Dame Watt, but she chuckled good-naturedly, as if she held no grudge against ale drinking for this one day at least.

'Twas true the men found toasts enough and were willing to drink them as they would have been to drink even such as were less popular. These, in sooth, were near their hearts; and there was reason they should be, no nobleman being more just and kindly to his tenants than his Grace of Osmonde, and no lady more deservedly beloved and looked up to with admiring awe than his young Duchess, now being tenderly watched over at Camylott Tower by one of Queen Catherine's own physicians and a score of assistants, nurses, and underlings.

Even at this moment, William Bush was holding forth to the company gathered about the door of the Plough Horse, he having risen from the oaken bench at its threshold to have his pewter tankard filled again.

"'Tis not alone Duke he will be," quoth he, "but with titles and estates enough to make a man feel like King Charles himself. 'Tis thus he will be writ down in history, as his Grace his father hath been before him: Duke of Osmonde--Marquess of Roxholm--Earl of Osmonde--Earl of Marlowell--Baron Dorlocke of Paulyn, and Baron Mertoun of Charleroy."

"Can a man then be six men at once?" said Gregory Watt.

"Ay, and each of him be master of a great house and rich estate. 'Tis so with this one. 'Tis said the Court itself waits to hear the news."

Stout Tom Comfort broke forth into a laugh.

"'Tis not often the Court waits," says he, "to hear news so honest. At Camylott Tower lies one Duchess whom King Charles did not make, thank God, but was made one by her husband."

Will Bush set down his tankard with a smack upon the table before the sitting-bench.

"She had but once appeared at Whitehall when his Grace met her and fell deep in love that hour," he said.

"Was't not rumoured," said Tom Comfort, somewhat lowering his voice, "that He cast glances her way as he casts them on every young beauty brought before him, and that his Grace could scarce hold his tongue--King or no King?"

"Ay," said Will Bush, sharply, "his royal glance fell on her, and he made a jest on what a man's joy would be whose fortune it was to see her violet eyes melt in love--and his Grace went to her mother, the Lady Elspeth, and besought her to let him proffer his vows to the young lady; and she was his Duchess in ten months' time--and Madame Carwell

had come from France, and in a year was made Duchess of Portsmouth."

"Heard you not that she too--some three weeks past--?" quoth Comfort, who was as fond of gossip as an old woman.

"Seventeen days gone," put in Bush; "and 'twas dead, by Heaven's mercy, poor brat. They say she loses her looks, and that his Majesty tires of her, and looks already toward other quarters." And so they sat over their ale and gossiped, they being supplied with anecdote by his Grace's gentleman's gentleman, who was fond of Court life and found the country tiresome, and whose habit it was to spend an occasional evening at the Plough Horse for the pleasure of having even an audience of yokels; liking it the better since, being yokels, they would listen open-mouthed and staring by the hour to his swagger and stories of Whitehall and Hampton Court, and the many beauties who surrounded the sacred person of his most gracious Majesty, King Charles the Second. Every yokel in the country had heard rumours of these ladies, but Mr. Mount gave those at Camylott village details which were often true and always picturesque.

"What could be expected," he would say, "of a man who had lived in gay exile through his first years, and then of a sudden was made a King, and had all the beauties of England kneeling before him--and he with a squat, black, long-toothed Portugee fastened to him for a wife? And Mistress Barbara Palmer at him from his first landing on English soil to be restored--she that was made my Lady Castlemaine."

And then he would relate stories of this beauteous fury, and her tempestuous quarrels with the King, and of how 'twas known his ease and pleasure-loving nature stood in terror of her violence and gave way before it with bribes and promises through sheer weariness.

"'Tis not that he loves her best," said Mr. Mount, snuff-taking in graceful Court fashion, "for he hath loved a dozen since; but she is a shrew, and can rave and bluster at him till he would hang her with jewels, and give her his crown itself to quieten her furies. 'Tis the pretty orange wench and actor woman Nell Gwynne who will please him longest, for she is a good-humoured baggage and witty, and gives him rest."

'Twas not alone Charles who was pleased with Nell Gwynne. All England liked her, and the lower orders best of all, because she was merry and kind of heart and her jokes and open-handedness pleased them. They were deep in the midst of a story of a poor gentleman in orders whom she had rescued from the debtors' prison, when old Rowe, who had been watching the road leading from the park gates, pricked up his ears and left his seat, trembling with excitement.

"'Tis a horse galloping," he cried; and as they all turned to look he flung his cap in the air. "'Tis the messenger," he burst forth, "and he waves his hat in his hand as if he had gone mad with joy. Off go I to the church tower as fast as legs will carry me."

And off he hobbled, and the messenger galloped onward, flourishing his hat as he rode, and giving it no rest till he drew rein before the Plough Horse door, and all gathered about him to hear his news.

"An heir--an heir!" he cried. "'Tis an heir, and as lusty as a young lion. Gerald Walter John Percy Mertoun, next Duke of Osmonde! Hurrah, hurrah, hurrah!"

And at the words all the men shouted and flung up their hats, the landlord with his wife and children ran forth, women rushed out of their cottages and cried for joy--and the bells in the old church's grey tower swung and rang such a peal of gladness as sounded as if they had gone wild in their ecstasy of welcome to the new-born thing.

In all England there was no nobleman's estate adorned by a house more beautiful than was the Tower of Camylott. Through the centuries in which it had stood upon the fair hill which was its site, there had passed no reign in which a king or queen had not been guest there, and no pair of royal eyes had looked from its window quite without envy, upon the richly timbered, far reaching park and the broad lovely land rolling away to the sea. There was no palace with such lands spread before it, and there were few kings' houses as stately and beautiful in their proportions as was this one.

The fairest room in the fair house had ever been the one known as her

Grace's White Chamber. 'Twas a spacious room with white panelled walls and large mullioned windows looking forth over green hill and vale and purple woodland melting into the blue horizon. The ivy grew thick about the windows, and birds nested therein and twittered tenderly in their little homes. The Duchess greatly loved the sound, as she did the fragrance of flowers with which the air of the White Chamber was ever sweet, and which was wafted up to it by each wandering breeze from the flower-beds blooming on the terrace below.

In this room--as the bells in the church tower rang their joyous peal--her young Grace lay in her great bed, her new-born child on her arm and her lord seated close to her pillow, holding her little hand to his lips, his lashes somewhat moist as he hung over his treasures.

"You scarce can believe that he is here," the Duchess whispered with a touching softness. "Indeed, I scarce believe it myself. 'Twas not fair of him to keep us waiting five years when we so greatly yearned for his coming. Perhaps he waited, knowing that we expected so much from him--such beauty and such wisdom and such strength. Let us look at him together, love. The physician will order you away from me soon, but let us see first how handsome he is."

She thrust the covering aside and the two heads--one golden and one brown--pressed closer together that they might the better behold the infant charms which were such joy to them.

"I would not let them bind his little limbs and head as is their way," she said. "From the first hour I spoke with his chief nurse, I gave her my command that he should be left free to grow and to kick his pretty legs as soon as he was strong enough. See, John, he stirs them a little now. They say he is of wondrous size and long and finely made, and indeed he seems so to me--and 'tis not only because I am so proud, is it?"

"I know but little of their looks when they are so young, sweet," her lord answered, his voice and eyes as tender as her own; for in sooth he felt himself moved as he had been at no other hour in his life before, though he was a man of a nature as gentle as 'twas strong. "I will own that I had ever thought of them as strange, unbeauteous red things a man almost held in fear, and whose ugliness a woman but loved because she was near angel; but this one--" and he drew nearer still with a grave countenance--"surely it looks not like the rest. 'Tis not so red and crumple-visaged--its tiny face hath a sort of comeliness. It hath a broad brow, and its eyes will sure be large and well set."

The Duchess slipped her fair arm about his neck--he was so near to her 'twas easy done--and her smile trembled into sweet tears which were half laughter.

"Ah, we love him so," she cried, "how could we think him like any other? We love him so and are so happy and so proud."

And for a moment they remained silent, their cheeks pressed together, the scent of the spring flowers wafting up to them from the terrace, the church bells pealing out through the radiant air.

"He was born of love," his mother whispered at last. "He will live amid love and see only honour and nobleness."

"He will grow to be a noble gentleman," said my lord Duke. "And some day he will love a noble lady, and they will be as we have been--as we have been, beloved."

And their faces turned towards each other as if some law of nature drew them, and their lips met--and their child stirred softly in its first sleep.