

CHAPTER XI

"It Might Have Been--It Might Have Been!"

The heavenly summer weeks he passed with his beloved parents at Camylott before they set forth on their journey to the Continent remained a sweet memory in the mind of the young Marquess so long as he lived, and was cherished by him most tenderly. In those lovely June days he spent his hours with his father and mother as he had spent them as a child, and in that greater intimacy and closer communion which comes to a son with riper years, if the situation is not reversed and his maturity has not drifted away from such fondness. Both the Duke and Duchess were filled with such noble pride in him and he with such noble love of them. All they had hoped for in him he had given them, all his manly heart longed for they bestowed upon him--tenderness, companionship, sympathy in all he did or dreamed of doing.

After his leave of absence it was his intention to rejoin his Grace of Marlborough on the Continent for a period, since his great friend had so desired, but later he would return and give up his career of arms to devote himself to the interests of his country in other ways, and of this his mother was particularly glad, feeling all a woman's fears for his safety and all her soft dread of the horrors of war.

"I would not have shown you my heart when you went away from England,

Gerald," she said. "'Twould not have been brave and just to do so since 'twas your desire to go. But no woman's heart can lie light in her breast when her son is in peril every hour--and I could not bear to think," her violet eyes growing softly dark, "that my son in winning glory might rob other mothers of their joy."

In their rides and talks together he would relate to his father the story of his campaign, describe to him the brilliant exploits of the great Duke, whom he had seen in his most magnificent hours, as only those who fought by his side had seen him; but with her Grace he did not dwell upon such things, knowing she would not be the happier for hearing of them. With her he would walk through the park, sauntering down the avenue beneath the oak-trees, or over the green sward to visit the deer, who knew the sound of her sweet voice, it seemed, and hearing it as she approached would lift their delicate heads and come towards her to be caressed and fed, welcoming her with the dewy lustrousness of their big timorous dark eyes, even the shyest does and little fawns nibbling from her fair and gentle hand, and following her softly a few paces when she turned away. Together she and Roxholm would wander through all the dear places he had loved in his childish years--into the rose gardens, which were a riot of beauty and marvellous colours and the pride and joy of the head gardener, who lived for and among them, as indeed they were the pride of those who worked under his command, not a man or boy of them knowing any such pleasure as to see her Grace walk through their labyrinths of bloom with my lord Marquess, each of them rejoicing in the loveliness on every side and gathering

the fairest blossoms as they went, until sometimes they carried away with them rich sheaves of crimson and pink and white and yellow. They loved the high-walled kitchen garden, too, and often visited it, spreading delight there among its gardeners by praising its fine growths, plucking the fruit and gathering nosegays of the old-fashioned flowers which bordered the beds of sober vegetables--sweet peas and Canterbury bells, wall-flowers, sweetwilliams, yellow musk, and pansies, making, her Grace said, the prettiest nosegay in the world. Then they would loiter through the village and make visits to old men and women sitting in the sun, to young mothers with babies in their arms and little mites playing about their feet.

"And you never enter a cottage door, mother," said Roxholm in his young manhood's pride and joy in her, "but it seems that the sun begins to shine through the little window, and if there is a caged bird hanging there it begins to twitter and sing. I cannot find a lady like you"--bending his knee and kissing her white fingers in gay caress. "Indeed, if I could I should bring her home to you to Camylott--and old Rowe might ring his bells until he lost his breath."

"Do you know," she answered, "what your father said to me the first morning I lay in my bed with you in my arm--old Rowe was ringing the bells as if he would go wild. I remember the joyful pealing of them as it floated across the park to come through my open window. We were so proud and full of happiness, and thought you so beautiful--and you are, Gerald, yet; so you are yet," with the prettiest smile, "and your

father said of you, 'He will grow to be a noble gentleman and wed a noble lady; and they will be as we have been--as we have been, beloved,' and we kissed each other with blissful tears in our eyes, and you moved in my arm, and there was a tiny, new-born smile on your little face."

"Dear one!" he said, kissing her hand more gravely; "dear one, God grant such sweetness may come to me--for indeed I want to love some woman dearly," and the warm blood mounted to his cheek.

Often in their tender confidences they spoke of this fair one who was to crown his happy life, and one day, having returned from a brief visit in another county, as they sat together in the evening she broke forth with a little sigh in her sweet voice.

"Ah, Gerald," she said, "I saw in Gloucestershire the loveliest strange creature--so lovely and so strange that she gave me an ache in the heart."

"And why, sweet one?" he asked.

"Because I think she must be the most splendid beautiful thing in all the world--and she has been so ill used by Fate. How could the poor child save herself from ill? Her mother died when she was born; her father is a wicked blasphemous rioter. He has so brought her up that she has known no woman all her life, but has been his pastime and toy.

From her babyhood she has been taught naught but evil. She is so strong and beautiful and wild that she is the talk of all the country. But, ah, Gerald, the look in her great eyes--her red young mouth--her wonderfulness! My heart stood still to see her. She hurt me so."

My lord Marquess looked down upon the floor and his brow knit itself.

"'Twould hurt any tender soul to see her," he said. "I am but a man--and I think 'twas rage I felt--that such a thing should be cast to ravening wolves."

"You," she cried, as if half alarmed; "you have seen her?"

"'Tis the beauty of Wildairs you speak of surely," he answered; "and I have seen her once--and heard of her often."

"Oh, Gerald," said her Grace, "'tis cruel. If she had had a mother--if God had but been good to her--" she put her hand up to her mouth to check herself, in innocent dread of that her words implied. "Nay, nay," she said, "if I would be a pious woman I must not dare to say such things. But oh! dearest one--if life had been fair to her, she--She is the one you might have loved and who would have worshipped such a man. It might have been--it might have been."

His colour died away and left him pale--he felt it with a sudden sense of shock.

"It was not," he said, hurriedly. "It was not--and she is but fourteen--and our lives lie far apart. I shall be in the field, or at the French or Spanish Courts. And were I on English soil I--I would keep away."

His mother turned pale also. Being his mother she felt with him the beating of his blood--and his face had a strange look which she had never seen before. She rose and went to him.

"Yes, yes, you are right," she exclaimed. "You could not--she could not--! And 'twould be best to keep away--to keep away. For if you loved her, 'twould drive you mad, and make you forget what you must be."

He tried to smile, succeeding but poorly.

"She makes us say strange things--even so far distant," he said.

"Perhaps you are right. Yes, I will keep away."

And even while he said it he was aware of a strange tumult in him, and knew that, senseless as it might appear, a new thing had sprung to life in him as if a flame had been lighted. And even in its first small leaping he feared it.

'Twas a week later their Graces set forth upon their journey, and

though Roxholm rode with them to Dover, and saw them aboard the packet, he always felt in after years that 'twas in the Long Gallery his mother had bidden him farewell.

They stood at the deep window at the end which faced the west and watched a glowing sunset of great splendour. Never had the earth spread before them seemed more beautiful, or Heaven's self more near. All the west was piled with heaps of stately golden cloud--great and high clouds, which were like the mountains of the Delectable Land, and filled one with awe whose eyes were lifted to their glories. And all the fair land was flooded with their gold. Her Grace looked out to the edge where moor and sky seemed one, and her violet eyes shone to radiance.

"It is the loveliest place in all the world," she said. "It has been the loveliest home--and I the happiest woman. There has not been an hour I would not live again."

She turned and lifted her eyes to his face and put one hand on his broad breast. "And you, Gerald," she said; "you have been happy. Tell me you have been happy, too."

"For twenty-eight years," he said, and folded his hand over hers. "For twenty-eight years."

She bent her face against his breast and kissed the hand closed over

her own.

"Yes--yes; you have been happy," she said. "You have said it often; but before I went away I wanted to hear you say it once again," and as she gazed up smiling, a last ray from the sinking sun shot through the window and made a halo about her deep gold hair.