CHAPTER XIV

"For all her youth--there is no other woman like her"

They were brought back in state from Italy and borne to their beloved Camylott, to sleep in peace there, side by side; and the bells in the church-tower tolled long and mournfully, and in the five villages in different shires there was not a heart which did not ache--nor one which having faith did not know that somewhere their happy love lived again and was more full of joy than it had been before. And my lord Marquess was my lord Duke; but for many months none beheld him but Lord Dunstanwolde, who came to Camylott with many great people to attend the funeral obsequies; but when all the rest went away he stayed, and through the first strange black weeks the two were nearly always together, and often, through hours, walked in company from one end of the Long Gallery to the other.

Over such periods of sorrow and bereavement it is well to pass gently, since they must come to all, and have so come through all the ages past, to every human being who has lived to maturity; and yet, at the same time, there is none can speak truly for another than himself of what the suffering has been or how it has been borne. None but the one who bears it can know what hours of anguish the endurance cost and how 'twas reached.

My lord Duke looked pale in his mourning garments, and for many months his countenance seemed sharper cut, his eyes looking deeper set and larger, having faint shadows round them, but even Lord Dunstanwolde knew but few of his inmost thoughts, and to others he never spoke of his bereavement.

The taking possession of a great estate, and the first assuming of the responsibilities attached to it, are no small events, and bring upon the man left sole heir numberless new duties, therefore the new Duke had many occupations to attend to--much counselling with his legal advisers, many interviews with stewards, bailiffs, and holders of his lands, visits to one estate after another, and converse with the reverend gentlemen who were the spiritual directors of his people. Such duties gave him less time for brooding than he would have had upon his hands had he been a man more thoughtless of what his responsibilities implied, and, consequently, more willing to permit them to devolve upon those in his employ.

"A man should himself know all things pertaining to his belongings," the new Duke said to Lord Dunstanwolde, "and all those who serve him should be aware that he knows, and that he will no more allow his dependents to cheat or slight him than he himself will stoop to carelessness or dishonesty in his dealings with themselves. To govern well, a man must be ruler as well as friend."

And this he was to every man in his five villages, and those who had worshipped him as their master's heir loved and revered him as their master.

The great Marlborough wrote a friendly letter expressing his sympathy for him in the calamity by which he had been overtaken, and also his regret at the loss of his services and companionship, he having at once resigned his commission in the army on the occurrence of his bereavement, not only feeling desirous of remaining in England, but finding it necessary to do so.

He spent part of the year upon his various estates in the country, but quarrels of Whigs and Tories, changes in the Cabinet, and the bitter feeling against the march into Germany and the struggles which promised to result, gave him work to do in London and opportunities for the development of those abilities his Grace of Marlborough had marked in him. The air on all sides was heavy with storm--at Court the enemies of Duchess Sarah (and they were many, whether they confessed themselves or not) were prognosticating her fall from her high post of ruler of the Queen of England, and her lord from his pinnacle of fame; there were high Tories and Jacobites who did not fear to speak of the scaffold as the last stage likely to be reached by the greatest military commander the country had ever known in case his march into Germany ended in disaster. There were indeed questions so momentous to be pondered over that for long months my lord Duke had but little time for reflection upon those incidents which had disturbed him by appearing to result

from the workings of persistent Fate.

But in a locked cabinet in his private closet there lay a picture which sometimes, as it were, despite himself, he took from its hiding-place to look upon; and when he found himself gazing at the wondrous face of storm, with its great stag's eyes, he knew that the mere sight waked in him the old tumult and that it did not lose its first strange, unexplained power. And once sitting studying the picture, his thought uttered itself aloud, his voice curiously breaking upon the stillness of the room.

"It is," he said, "as if that first hour a deep chord of music had been struck--a stormy minor chord--and each time I hear of her or see her the same chord is struck loud again, and never varies by a note. I swear there is a question in her eyes--and I--I could answer it. Yet, for my soul's sake, I must keep away."

He knew honour itself demanded this of him, for the stories which came to his ears were each wilder and more fantastic than the other, and sometimes spoke strange evil of her--of her violent temper, of her wicked tongue, of her outraging of all customs and decencies, but, almost incredible as it seemed, none had yet proved that her high spirit and proud heart had been subjugated and she made victim by a conqueror. 'Twas this which was talked of at the clubs and coffee-houses, where her name was known by those frequenting them.

"She would be like a hare let loose to be hounded to her death by every pack in the county," my Lord Twemlow had said the night he talked of her at Dunstan's Wolde, and every man agreed with him and waited for the outburst of a scandal, and made bets as to when it would break forth. There were those among the successful heart-breakers whose vanity was piqued by the existence of so invincible and fantastical a female creature, and though my lord Duke did not hear of it, their worlds being far apart, the male beauty and rake, Sir John Oxon, was among them, his fretted pride being so well known among his fellow-beaux that 'twas their habit to make a joke of it and taunt him with their witticisms.

"She is too big a devil," they said, "to care a fig for any man. She would laugh in the face of the mightiest lady-killer in London, and flout him as if he were a mercer's apprentice or a plough-boy. He does not live who could trap her."

With most of them, the noble sport of chasing women was their most exalted pastime. They were like hunters on the chase of birds, the man who brought down the rarest creature of the wildest spirit and the brightest plumage was the man who was a hero for a day at least.

The winter my lord Duke of Marlborough spent at Hanover, Berlin, Vienna, and the Hague, engaged in negotiations and preparations for his campaign, and at Vienna his Grace of Osmonde joined him that they might talk face to face, even the great warrior's composure being shaken by

the disappointment of the year. But a fortnight before his leaving England there came to Osmonde's ear rumours of a story from Gloucestershire--'twas of a nature more fantastic than any other, and far more unexpected. The story was imperfectly told and without detail, and detail no man or woman seemed able to acquire, and baffled curiosity ran wild, no story having so whetted it as this last.

"But we shall hear later," said one, "for 'tis said Jack Oxon was there, being on a visit to his kinsman, Lord Eldershawe, who has been the young lady's playmate from her childhood. Jack will come back primed and will strut about for a week and boast of his fortunes whether he can prove them or not."

But this Osmonde did not hear, having already left town for a few days at Camylott, where my Lord Dunstanwolde accompanied him, and at the week's end they went together to Warwickshire, and as on the occasion of Osmonde's other visit, the first evening they were at the Wolde came my Lord Twemlow, more excited than ever before, and he knew and told the whole story.

"Things have gone from bad to worse," he said, "and at last I sent my Chaplain as I had planned, and the man came back frightened out of his wits, having reached the hall-door in a panic and there found himself confronted by what he took to be a fine lad in hunting-dress making his dog practise jumping tricks. And 'twas no lad, of course, but my fine mistress in her boy's clothes, and she takes him to her father and

makes a saucy jest of the whole matter, tossing off a tankard of ale as she sits on the table laughing at him and keeping Sir Jeoffry from breaking his head in a rage. And in the end she sends an impudent message to me--but says I am right, the shrewd young jade, and that she will see that no disgrace befalls me. But for all that, the Chaplain came home in a cold sweat, poor fool, and knows not what to say when he speaks of her."

"And then?" said my Lord Dunstanwolde, somewhat anxiously, "is it true--that which we heard rumoured in town----"

Lord Twemlow shook his head ruefully. "Heaven knows how it will end," he said, "or if it is but a new impudent prank--or what she will do next--but the whole country is agog with the story. She bade her father invite his rapscallion crew to her birthnight supper, and says 'tis that they may see her in breeches for the last time, for she will wear them no more, but begin to live a sober, godly, and virtuous life and keep a Chaplain of her own. And on the twenty-fourth night of November, she turning fifteen, they gather prepared for sport, and find her attired like a young prince, in pink satin coat and lace ruffles and diamond buckles and powder; more impudent and handsome than since she was born. And when the drinking sets in heavily, upon her chair she springs and stands laughing at the company of them.

"'Look your last on my fine shape,' she cries, 'for after to-night you'll see no more of it. From this I am a fine lady,' and sings a song

and drinks a toast and breaks her glass on the floor and runs away."

At a certain period of my Lord Twemlow's first story, the night he told it, both his Lordship of Dunstanwolde and the then Marquess of Roxholm had made unconscious movements as they heard--this had happened when had been described the falling of the mantle of black hair and the little oaths with which Mistress Clorinda had sat on her hunter binding it up--and at this point--at this other picture of the audacious beauty and her broken glass each man almost started again--my Lord Dunstanwolde indeed suddenly rising and taking a step across the hearth.

"What a story," he said. "On my soul!"

"And 'tis not the end!" cried Lord Twemlow. "An hour she leaves them talking of her, wondering what she plans to do, and then the door is flung wide open and there she stands--splendid in crimson and silver and jewels, with a diadem on her head, and servants holding lights flaming above her."

My Lord Dunstanwolde turned about and looked at him as if the movement was involuntary, and Lord Twemlow ended with a blow upon the table, his elderly face aflame with appreciation of the dramatic thing he told.

"And makes them a great Court courtesy," he cried, his voice growing almost shrill, "and calls on them all to fall upon their knees, by God!

'for so,' she says, 'from this night all men shall kneel--all men on whom I deign to cast my eyes.'"

His Grace the Duke of Osmonde had listened silently, and throughout with an impenetrable face, but at this moment he put up his hand and slightly swept his brow with his fingers, as if he felt it damp.

"And now what does it mean?" my Lord Twemlow asked them, with an anxious face. "And how will it end? A fortnight later she appeared at church dressed like a lady of the Court, and attended by her sisters and their governess, as if she had never appeared unattended in her life, and prayed, good Lord, with such a majestic seriousness, and listened to the sermon with such a face as made the parson forget his text and fumble about for his notes in dire confusion. 'Twas thought she might be going to play some trick to cause him to break down in the midst of his discourse. But she did not, and sailed out of church as if she had never missed a sermon since she was born."

"Perhaps," said my Lord Dunstanwolde, "perhaps her mind has changed and 'tis true she intends to live more gravely."

"Nay," answered Lord Twemlow, with a troubled countenance. "No such good fortune. She doth not intend to keep it up--and how could she if she would? A girl who hath lived as she hath, seeing no decent company and with not a woman about her--though for that matter they say she

has the eye of a hawk and the wit of a dozen women, and the will to do aught she chooses. But surely she could not keep it up!"

"Another woman could not," said Osmonde. "A woman who had not a clear, strong brain and a wondrous determination--a woman who was weak or a fool, or even as other women, could not. But surely--for all her youth--there is no other woman like her."