

CHAPTER XV

"And 'twas the town rake and beauty--Sir John Oxon"

That night he lay almost till 'twas morning, his eyes open upon the darkness, since he could not sleep, finding it impossible to control the thoughts which filled his mind. 'Twas a night whose still long hours he never could forget in the years that followed, and 'twas not a memory which was a happy one. He passed through many a curious phase of thought, and more than once felt a pang of sorrow that he was now alone as he had never thought of being, and that if suffering came, his silent endurance of it must be a new thing. To be silent because one does not wish to speak is a different matter from being silent because one knows no creature dear and near enough to hear the story of one's trouble. He realised now that the tender violet eyes which death had closed would have wooed from his reserve many a thing it might have been good to utter in words.

"She would always have understood," he thought. "She understood when she cried out, 'It might have been!'"

He clasped his hands behind his head and lay so, smiling with mingled bitterness and joy.

"It has begun!" he said. "I have heard them tell of it--of how one woman's face came back again and again, of how one pair of eyes would look into a man's and would not leave him, nor let him rest. It has begun for me, too. For good or evil, it has begun."

Until this night he had told himself, and believed himself in the telling, that he had been strangely haunted by thoughts of a strange creature, because the circumstances by which she was encompassed were so unusual and romantic as would have lingered in the mind of any man whether old or young; and this he had been led to feel the more confident of, since he was but one of a dozen men, and indeed each one who knew of her existence appeared to regard her as the heroine of a play, though so far it was to them but a rattling comedy. But from this night he knew a different thing, and realised that he was face to face with that mystery which all men do not encounter, some only meeting with the mere fleeting image of it and never knowing what the reality is--that mystery which may be man's damnation or his heaven, his torture and heart-sickening, or his life and strength and bliss. What his would bring to him, or bring him to, he knew not in the least, and had at times a pang at thought of it, but sometimes such a surge of joy as made him feel himself twice man instead of once.

When he went forth to ride the next day it was with a purpose clear in his mind. Hitherto all he had seen or heard had been by chance, but if he saw aught this morning 'twould be because he had hoped for and gone to meet it.

"Before I cross the sea," was his thought, "I would see her once again if chance so favors me. I would see if there seems any new thing in her face, and if there is--if this is no wild jest and comedy, but means that she has wakened to knowing herself a woman--I shall know when I see her eyes and can carry my thought away with me. Then when I come back--'twill be but a few months at the most--I will ride into Gloucestershire the first week I am on English soil, and I will go to her and ask that I may be her servant until she learns what manner of man I am and can tell me to go--or stay."

If Sir Jeffry and his crew had dreamed that such a thought worked in the mind of one of the richest young noblemen in England--he a Duke and handsome enough to set any woman's heart beating--as he rode through the Gloucestershire lanes; if they had dreamed that such a thing was within the bounds of human possibility, what a tumult would have been roused among them; how they would have stared at each other, with mouths open, uttering exclamatory oaths of wild amazement and ecstatic triumph; how they would have exulted and drunk each other's healths and their wild playmate's and her splendid fortunes. But, in truth, that such a thing could be, would have seemed to them as likely as that Queen Anne herself should cast a gracious eye upon a poor, fox-hunting, country baronet who was one of her rustic subjects. The riot of Wildairs and its company was a far cry indeed from Camylott and St. James.

If my Lord Twemlow had guessed at the possibility of the strange thing, and had found himself confronting a solution of his carking problem which would flood its past with brilliance and illuminate all its future with refulgent light, casting a glow of splendour even over his own plain country gentleman's existence, how he would have started and flushed with bewildered pride and rubbed his periwig awry in his delighted excitement. If my Lord Dunstanwolde, sitting at that hour in his silent library, a great book open before him, his forehead on his slender veined hand, his thoughts wandering far away, if he had been given by Fate an inkling of the truth which none knew or suspected, or had reason for suspecting, perhaps he would have been the most startled and struck dumb of all--the most troubled and amazed and shocked.

But of such a thing no one dreamed, as, indeed, why should they, and my lord Duke of Osmonde rode over the border into Gloucestershire on his fine beast, and, trotting-up the roads and down the lanes, wore a look upon his face which showed him deep in thought.

'Twas a grey day, unbrightened by any sun. For almost a week there had been rain, and the roads were heavy and the lanes muddy and full of pools of miry water.

It was the intention of my lord Duke to let his horse carry him over such roads and lands as would be in the near neighbourhood of Wildairs, and while he recognised the similarity of his action to that of a school-boy in love, who paces the street before his sweetheart's

dwelling, there was no smile at himself, either on his countenance or in his mind.

"I may see her," he said quietly to himself. "I am more like to catch sight of her on these roads than on any other, and, school-boy trick or not, 'twill serve, and if she passes will have won me what I long for--for it is longing, this. I know it now, and own it to myself."

And see her he did, but as is ever the case when a man has planned a thing, it befell as he had not thought of its happening--and 'twas over in a flash.

Down one of the wet lanes he had turned and was riding slowly when he heard suddenly behind him a horse coming at such a sharp gallop that he wheeled his own beast aside, the way being dangerously narrow, that so tempestuous a rider might tear by in safety. And as he turned and was half screened by the bushes, the rider swept past him splashing through the mire and rain-pools so that the muddy water flew up beneath the horses' hoofs--and 'twas the object of his thoughts herself!

She rode her tall young horse and was not clad as he had before beheld her, but in rich riding-coat and hat and sweeping feather. No maid of honour of her Majesty Queen Anne's rode attired more fittingly, none certainly with such a seat and spirit, and none, Heaven knew, looked like her.

These things he marked in a flash, not knowing he had marked them until afterwards, so strong and moving was his sudden feeling that in her nature at that moment there worked some strange new thing--some mood new to herself and angering her. Her brows were bent, her eyes were set and black with shadow. She bit her full lip as she rode, and her horse went like the wind. For but a moment she was through the lane and clattering on the road.

My lord Duke was breathing fast and bit his own lip, but the next second broke into a laugh, turning his horse, whose bridle he had caught up with a sudden gesture.

"Nay," he said, "a man cannot gallop after a lady without ceremony, and command her to stand and deliver as if he were a highwayman. Yet I was within an ace of doing it--within an ace. I have beheld her! I had best ride back to Dunstan's Wolde."

And so he did, at a hot pace; but if he had chanced to turn on the top of the hill he might have seen below him in a lane to the right that two rode together, and one was she whom he had but just seen, her companion a horseman who had leapt a gate in a field and joined her, with flushed cheeks and wooing eyes, though she had frowned--and 'twas the town rake and beauty, Sir John Oxon.