

CHAPTER XVII

As Hugh de Mertoun Rode

When he rode back upon the road which led towards Gloucestershire, 'twas early June again, as it had been when he journeyed to Camylott with Mr. Fox attending. The sky was blue once more, there was the scent of sweet wild things in the air, birds twittered in the hedgerows and skylarks sang on high; all was in full fair leafage and full fair life. This time Mr. Fox was not with him, he riding alone save for his servants, following at some distance, for in truth 'twas his wish to be solitary, and he rode somewhat like a man in a dream.

"There is no land like England," he said, "there are no such meadows elsewhere, no such hedgerows, no such birds, and no such soft fleeced white clouds in the blue sky." In truth, it seemed so to him, as it seems always to an Englishman returning from foreign lands. The thatched cottages spoke of homely comfort, the sound of the village church bells was like a prayer, the rustics, as they looked up from work in the fields to pull their forelocks as he rode by them, seemed to wear kindlier looks upon their sunburnt faces than he had seen in other countries.

"But," he said to himself, and smiled in saying it, "it is because I am

a happy man, and am living like one who dreams. Men have ridden before on such errands. Hugh de Mertoun rode so four hundred years gone, to a grey castle in the far north of Scotland, to make his suit to a fair maiden whose beauties he had but heard rumour of and whose face he had never seen. He rode through a savage country, and fought his way to her against axe and spear. But when he reached her she served him in her father's banquet hall, and in years after used to kiss the scars left by his wounds, and sing at her harp the song of his journey to woo her. But he had not known her since the time of her birth, and been haunted by her until her womanhood."

To Dunstan's Wolde in Warwickshire he rode, where he was to be a guest, and sometimes he reproached himself that he was by natural habit of such reserve that in all their converse together he had never felt that he could speak his thoughts to his kinsman on the one subject they had dwelt most upon. During the last two years he had realised how few words he had uttered on this subject even in the days before he had known the reason for his tendency to silence. At times when Dunstanwolde had spoken with freedom and at length of circumstances which attracted the comments of all, he himself had been more frequently listener than talker, and had been wont to sit in attentive silence, making his reflections later to himself when he was alone. After the day on which he had lost himself upon Sir Christopher Crowell's land and, lying among the bracken, had heard the talk of the sportsmen below, he had known why he had been so reticent, and during his last two years he had realised that this reticence had but

increased. Despite his warm love for my Lord Dunstanwolde there had never come an hour when he felt that he could have revealed even by the most distant allusion the tenor of his mind. In his replies to his lordship's occasional epistles he had touched more lightly upon his references to the household of Wildairs than upon other things of less moment to him. Of Court stories he could speak openly, of country, town, and letters, with easy freedom, but when he must acknowledge news from Gloucestershire, he sat grave before his paper, his pen idle in his hand, and found but few sentences to indite.

"But later," he would reflect, "I shall surely feel myself more open--and his kind heart is so full of sympathy that he will understand my silence and not feel it has been grudging or ungenerous to his noble friendship."

And even now as he rode to the home of this gentleman whose affection he had enjoyed with so much of appreciation and gratitude, he consoled himself again with this thought, knowing that the time had not yet come when he could unbosom himself, nor would it come until all the world must be taken into his confidence, and he stand revealed an exultant man whose joy broke all bonds for him since that he had dreamed of he had won.

When he had made his last visit to Warwickshire he had thought my lord looking worn and fatigued, and had fancied he saw some hint of new trouble in his eyes. He had even spoke with him of his fancy, trusting

that he had no cause for anxiousness and was not in ill-health, and had been answered with a kindly smile, my lord averring that he had no new thing to weary him, but only one which was old, with which he had borne more than sixty years, and which was somewhat the worse for wear in these days--being himself.

He thought of this reply as he passed through the lovely village where every man, woman, and child knew him and greeted him with warmly welcoming joy, and he was pondering on it as he rode through the park gates and under the big beech-trees which formed the avenue.

"Somewhat had saddened him," he thought. "Pray God it has passed," and was aroused from his thinking by a sound of horses' feet, and looking up saw my lord cantering towards him on his brown hackney, and with brightly smiling face.

They greeted each other with joyful affection, as they always did in meeting, and my lord's welcome had a touch of even more loving warmth than usual. He had come out to meet his guest and kinsman on the road, and had thought to be in time to join him earlier and ride with him through the village.

"On my soul, Gerald," he said, gaily, "'tis useless that you should grow handsomer and taller each time you leave us. Surely, there is a time for a man to be content. Or is it that when you are absent one sees gentlemen of proportions so much more modest that when you return

we must get used to your looks again. Your sunburn is as becoming as your laurels."

His own worn look had passed. Osmonde had never seen him so well and vigorous, being indeed amazed by his air of freshness and renewed youth. His finely cut, high bred countenance had gained a slight colour, his sweet grey eyes were clear and full of light, and he bore himself more strongly and erect. For the first time within his remembrance of him, my lord Duke observed that he wore another colour than black, though it was of rich, dark shade, being warm, deep brown, and singularly becoming him, his still thick grey hair framing in silver his fine, gentle face.

"And you," Osmonde answered him, marking all these things with affectionate pleasure, "your weariness has left you. I have never seen you look so young and well."

"Young!" said my lord, smiling, "at sixty-eight? Well, in truth, I feel so. Let us pray it may not pass. 'Tis hope--which makes new summer."

They dined alone, and sitting over their wine had cheerful talk. A man is not absent from his native land for two good years, even when they are spent in ordinary travel, without on his return having much to recount in answer to the questionings of his friends; but two years spent in camp and Court during a great campaign may furnish hours of talk indeed.

Yet though their conversation did not flag, and each found pleasure in the other's company, Osmonde was conscious of a secret restlessness. Throughout the whole passing of the repast it chanced not once that the name was mentioned which had so often been spoke before when they had been together; there had been a time when in no talk of the neighbourhood could it well have been avoided, but now, strangely enough, no new incident was related, no reference to its bearer made. This might, perhaps, be because the heroine of that scandal, having begun to live the ordinary life of womankind, there were no fantastic stories to tell, the county having had time to become accustomed to the change in her and comment on it no more. And still there was a singularity in the silence. Yet for my lord Duke himself it was impossible to broach the subject, he being aware that he was not calm enough in mind to open it with a composure which would not betray his interest.

He had come from town under promise to attend that night a birthday ball in the neighbourhood, a young relative coming of age and celebrating his majority. The kinship was not close, but greatly valued by the family of the heir, and his Grace's presence had been so ardently desired, that he, who honoured all claims of his house and name, had given his word.

And 'twas at last through speech of this, and only as they parted to apparel themselves for this festivity, my Lord Dunstanwolde touched

upon the thing one man of them, at least, had not had power to banish from his mind throughout their mutual talk.

"Young Colin is a nice, well-meaning lad," said my lord as they passed through the hall to mount the staircase. "He is plain featured and awkward, but modest and of good humour. He will be greatly honoured that the hero of his house should be present on the great night. You are the hero, you know, having been with Marlborough, and bearing still the scar of a wound got at Blenheim, though 'twas 'not as deep as a grave or as wide as a church door.' And with orders on your broad chest and the scent of gunpowder in your splendid periwig you will make a fine figure. They will all prostrate themselves before you, and when you make your state bow to the beauty, Mistress Clorinda--for you will see her--she will surely give you a dazzling smile."

"That I will hope for," answered my lord Duke, smiling himself; but his heart leaped like a live thing in his breast and did not cease its leaping as he mounted the stairway, though he bore himself with outward calm.

When within his room he strode to and fro, his arms folded across his breast. For some time he could not have composed himself to sit down or go to rest. This very night, then, he was to behold her face to face; in but a few hours he would stand before her bowing, and rise from his obeisance to look into the great eyes which had followed him so long--ay, so much longer than he had truly understood. What should he

read there--what thought which might answer to his own? It had been his plan to go to my Lord Twemlow and ask that he might be formally presented to his fair kinswoman and her parent. Knowing his mind, he was no schoolboy who would trust to chance, but would move directly and with dignity towards the object he desired. The representatives of her family would receive him, and 'twas for himself to do the rest. But now he need go to no man to ask to be led to her presence. The mere chance of Fortune would lead him there. 'Twas strange how it had ever been so--that Fate's self had seemed to work to this end.

The chamber was a huge one and he had paced its length many times before he stopped and stood in deep thought.

"'Tis sure because of this," he said, "that I have so little doubt. There lies scarce a shadow yet in my mind. 'Tis as if Nature had so ordained it before I woke to life, and I but go to obey her law."

His eye had fallen upon a long mirror standing near, but he did not see what was reflected there, and gazed through and beyond it as if at another thing. And yet the image before him was one which might have removed doubt of himself from any man's heart, it being of such gracious height and manly strength, and, with its beauteous leonine eye and brow, its high bearing, and the richness of its apparel, so noble a picture.

He turned away unseeing, with a smile and half a sigh of deep and

tender passion. "May I ride home," he said, "as Hugh de Mertoun did--four hundred years ago!"

When they arrived at their entertainer's house the festivities were at full; brilliant light shone from every window and streamed from the wide entrance in a flood, coaches rolled up the avenue and waited for place before the door, from within strains of music floated out to the darkness of the night, and as the steps were mounted each arrival caught glimpses of the gay scene within: gentlemen in velvet and brocade and ladies attired in all the rich hues of a bed of flowers--crimson, yellow, white and blue, purple and gold and rose.

Their young host met them on the threshold and welcomed them with boyish pride and ardour. He could scarce contain himself for pleasure at being so honoured in his first hospitalities by the great kinsman of his house, who, though but arrived at early maturity, was already spoken of as warrior, statesman, and honoured favourite at Court.

"We are but country gentry, your Grace," he said, reddening boyishly, when he had at length led them up the great stairway to the ball-room, "and most of us have seen little of the world. As for me, I have but just come from Cambridge, where I fear I did myself small credit. In my father's day we went but seldom to town, as he liked horses and dogs better than fine company. So I know nothing of Court beauties, but to-night--" and he reddened a little more and ended somewhat

awkwardly--"to-night you will see here a beauty who surely cannot be outshone at Court, and men tell me cannot be matched there."

"'Tis Mistress Clorinda Wildairs he speaks of," said Sir Christopher Crowell, who stood near, rubicund in crimson, and he said it with an uncourtly wink; "and, ecod! he's right--though I am not 'a town man."

"He is enamoured of her," he added in proud confidence later when he found himself alone for a moment by his Grace. "The youngsters are all so--and men who are riper, too. Good Lord, look at me who have dandled her on my knee when she was but five years old--and am her slave," chuckling. "She's late to-night. Mark the fellows loitering about the doors and on the stairway. 'Tis that each hopes to be the first to catch her eye."

'Twas but a short time afterward my lord Duke had made his way to the grand staircase himself, it being his intention to go to a lower room, and reaching the head of it he paused for a moment to gaze at the brilliant scene. The house was great and old, and both halls and stairway of fine proportions, and now, brilliant with glow of light and the moving colour of rich costumes, presented indeed a comely sight. And he had no sooner paused to look down than he heard near by a murmur of low exclamation, and close at his side a man broke forth in rough ecstasy to his companion.

"Clorinda, by Gad!" he said, "and crowned with roses! The vixen makes them look as if they were built of rubies in every leaf."

And from below she came--up the broad stairway, upon her father's arm.

Well might their eyes follow her indeed, and well might his own look down upon her, burning. The strange compellingness of her power, which was a thing itself apart from beauty, and would have ruled for her had she not possessed a single charm, had so increased that he felt himself change colour at the mere sight of her. Oh! 'twas not the colour and height and regal shape of her which were her splendour, but this one Heaven-born, unconquerable thing. Her lip seemed of a deeper scarlet, the full roundness of her throat rose from among her laces, bound with a slender circlet of glittering stars, her eyes had grown deeper and more melting, and yet held a great flame. Nay, she seemed a flame herself--of life, of love, of spirit which naught could daunt or quell, and on her high-held imperial head she wore a wreath of roses red as blood.

"She will look up," he thought, "she will look up at me."

But she did not, though he could have sworn that which he felt should have arrested her. Somewhat seemed to hold her oblivious of those who were near her; she gazed straight before her as if expecting to see something, and as she passed my lord Duke on the landing, a heavy velvet rose broke from her crown and fell at his very foot.

He bent low to pick it up, the blood surging in his veins--and when he raised himself, holding it in his hand, she was moving onward through the crowd which closed behind to gaze and comment on her--and his kinsman Dunstanwolde came forward from an antechamber, his gentle, high bred face and sweet grey eyes glowing with greeting.

Those of reflective habit may indeed find cause for thought in realising the power of small things over great, of rule over important events, of ordinary social observance over the most powerful emotion a man or woman may be torn or uplifted by. He whose greatest longing on earth is to speak face to face to the friend whom ill fortune has caused to think him false, seeing this same friend in a crowded street a hundred yards distant, cannot dash the passers-by aside and race through or leap over them to reach, before it is too late, the beloved object he beholds about to disappear; he cannot arrest that object with loud outcries, such conduct being likely to cause him to be taken for a madman, and restrained by the other lookers-on; the tender woman whose heart is breaking under the weight of misunderstanding between herself and him she loves, is powerless to attract and detain him if he passes her, either unconscious of her nearness or of intention coldly averting his gaze from her pleading eyes. She may know that, once having crossed the room where she sits in anguish, all hope is lost that they may meet again on this side of the grave. She may know that a dozen words would fill his heart with joy, and that all life would smile to

both henceforth, but she cannot force her way to his side in public; she cannot desert without ceremony the stranger who is conversing courteously; she cannot cry out, she may not even speak, it may be that it is not possible that she should leave her place--and he who is her heart's blood approaches slowly--is near--has passed--is gone--and all has come to bitter, cruel end. In my lord Duke of Osmonde's mind there was no thought of anguish or the need for it; he but realised that he had felt an unreasonable pang when she whom he had so desired to behold had passed him by unnoticed. 'Twas after all a mere trick of chance, and recalled to him the morning two years before, when he had heard her horse's feet splashing through the mire of the narrow lane, and had drawn his own beast aside while she galloped past unaware of his nearness, and with the strange, absorbed, and almost fierce look in her eyes. He had involuntarily gathered his bridle to follow her and then had checked his impulse, realising its impetuosity, and had turned to ride homeward with a half smile on his lips but with his heart throbbing hard. But what perchance struck him most to-night, was that her eyes wore a look unlike, yet somehow akin, to that which he had marked and been moved by then--as if storm were hid within their shadows and she herself was like some fine wild thing at bay.

There would have been little becomingness in his hastening after her and his Lordship of Dunstanwolde; his court to her must be paid with grace and considerateness. If there were men who in their eagerness forgot their wit and tact, he was not one of them.

He turned to re-enter the ball-room and approach her there, and on the threshold encountered young Colin, who looked for the moment pale.

"Did you see her?" he asked. "She has but just passed through the room with my Lord Dunstanwolde--Mistress Clorinda," he added, with a little rueful laugh. "In Gloucestershire there is but one 'she.' When we speak of the others we use their names and call them Mistress Margaret or my Lady Betty--or Jane."

"I stood at the head of the stairway as she passed," answered Osmonde.

"It cannot be true," the lad broke forth; "it makes me mad even to hear it spoke--though he is a courtly gentleman and rich and of high standing--but he is old enough to be her grandfather. Though she is such a woman, she is but seventeen, and my lord is near seventy."

Osmonde turned an inquiring gaze upon him, and the boy broke into his confused half-laugh again.

"I speak of my Lord Dunstanwolde," he said. "Twice he has asked her to be his Countess, and all say that to-night she is to give him her answer. Jack Oxon has heard it and is mad enough. Look at him as he stands by the archway there. His eyes are like blue steel and he can scarce hide his rage. But better she should take Dunstanwolde than Jack"--hotly.

The musicians were playing a minuet in the gallery, there was dancing, slow, stately movements and deep obeisance going on in the room, couples were passing to and fro, and here and there groups stood and watched. My lord Duke stood and watched also; a little court had gathered about him and he must converse with those who formed it, or listen with gracious attention to their remarks. But his grace and composure cost him an effort. There came back to him the story old Lady Storms had told in Vienna and which he had not believed and had even forgot. The memory of it returned to him with singular force and clearness. He told himself that still it could not be true, that his young host's repetition of it rose from the natural uneasy jealousy of a boy--and yet the pageant of the brilliant figures moving before him seemed to withdraw themselves as things do in a dream. He remembered my Lord Dunstanwolde's years and his faithfulness to the love of his youth, and there arose before him the young look he had worn when they met in the avenue, his words, "'Tis hope which makes new summer," and the music of the minuet sounded distant in his ears, while as it rang there, he knew he should not forget it to his life's end. Yet no, it could not be so. A gentleman near seventy and a girl of seventeen! And still, to follow the thought honestly, even at seven and sixty years my Lord had greater grace and charm than many a man not half his age. And with that new youth and tenderness in his eyes no woman could shrink from him, at least. And still it could not be true, for Fate herself had driven him to this place--Nature and Fate.

Sir John Oxon stood near the doorway, striving to smile, but biting his lip; here and there his Grace vaguely observed that there seemed new talk among the moving couples and small gathered groups. About the entrance there was a stirring and looking out into the corridor, and in a moment or so more the company parted and gave way, and his Lordship of Dunstanwolde entered, with Mistress Clorinda upon his arm; he, gracefully erect in bearing, as a conqueror returning from his victory.

An exclamation broke from the young Colin which was like a low cry.

"Tis true!" he said. "Yes, yes; 'tis in his eyes. 'Tis done--'tis done!"

His Grace of Osmonde turned towards his kinsman, who he saw was approaching him, and greeted him with a welcoming smile; the red rose was still held in his hand. He stood drawn to his full height, a stately, brilliant figure, with his orders glittering on his breast, his fine eyes deeply shining--waiting.

The company parted before the two advancing figures--his lordship's rich violet velvet, the splendid rose and silver making a wondrous wave of colour, the wreath of crimson flowers on the black hair seeming like a crown of triumph.

Before my lord Duke they paused, and never had the old Earl's gentle, high bred face worn so tenderly affectionate a smile, or his grey eyes

so sweet a light.

"My honoured kinsman, his Grace the Duke of Osmonde," he said to her who glowed upon his arm. "Your Grace, it is this lady who is to do me the great honour of becoming my Lady Dunstanwolde."

And they were face to face, her great orbs looking into his own, and he saw a thing which lay hid in their very depths--and his own flashed despite himself, and hers fell; and he bowed low, and she swept a splendid curtsy to the ground.

So, for the first time in their lives, he looked into her eyes.