

CHAPTER XIX

"Then you might have been one of those----"

When the Earl and Countess of Dunstanwolde arrived in town and took up their abode at Dunstanwolde House, which being already one of the finest mansions, was made still more stately by its happy owner's command, the world of fashion was filled with delighted furore. Those who had heard of the Gloucestershire beauty by report were stirred to open excitement, and such as had not already heard rumours of her were speedily informed of all her past by those previously enlightened. The young lady who had so high a spirit as to have at times awakened somewhat of terror in those who were her adversaries; the young lady who had made such a fine show in male attire, and of whom it had been said that she could outleap, outfence, and outswear any man her size, had made a fine match indeed, marrying an elderly nobleman and widower, who for years had lived the life of a recluse, at last becoming hopelessly enamoured of one who might well be his youngest child.

"What will she do with him?" said a flippant modish lady to his Grace of Osmonde one morning. "How will she know how to bear herself like a woman of quality?"

"Should you once behold her, madam," said his Grace, "you will know how she would bear herself were she made Queen."

"Faith!" exclaimed the lady, "with what a grave, respectful air you say it. I thought the young creature but a joke."

"She is no joke," Osmonde answered, with a faint, cold smile.

"'Tis plain enough 'tis true what is said--the men all lose their hearts to her. We thought your Grace was adamant"--with simpering roguishness.

"The last two years I have spent with the army in Flanders," said my lord Duke, "and her Ladyship of Dunstanwolde is the wife of my favourite kinsman."

'Twas this last fact which was the bitterest thing of all, and which made his fate most hard to bear with patience. What he had dreaded had proven itself true, and more. Had my Lord Dunstanwolde been a stranger to him or a mere acquaintance he could have escaped all, or at least the greater part, of what he now must endure. As the chief of his house his share in the festivities attendant upon the nuptials had been greater than that of any other man. As one who seemed through their long affection to occupy almost the place of a son to the bridegroom, it had been but natural that he should do him all affectionate service, show the tenderest courtesy to his bride, and behold all it most tortured him to see. His gifts had been the most magnificent, his words of friendly gratulation the warmest. When they were for a few moments,

on the wedding-day, alone, his Lordship had spoken to him of the joy which made him pale.

"Gerald," he said, "I could speak to none other of it. Your great heart will understand. 'Tis almost too sacred for words. Shall I waken from a dream? Surely, 'tis too heavenly sweet to last."

Would it last? his kinsman asked himself in secret, could it? Could one, like her, and who had lived her life, feel an affection for a consort so separated from her youth and bloom by years? She was so young, and all the dazzling of the world was new. What beautiful, high-spirited, country-bred creature of eighteen would not find its dazzle blind her eyes so that she could scarce see aright? He asked himself the questions with a pang. To expect that she should not even swerve with the intoxication of it, was to expect that she should be nigh superhuman, and yet if she should fail, and step down from the high shrine in which his passion had placed her, this would be the fiercest anguish of all.

"Were she mine," he cried, inwardly, "I could hold and guide her with love's hand. We should be lost in love, and follies and Courts would have no power. Love would be her shield and mine. Poor gentleman," remembering the tender worship in my Lord's kind face; "how can she love him as he loves her? But oh, she should--she should!"

If in the arrogance of her youth and power she could deal with him

lightly or unkindly, he knew that even his own passion could find no pardon for her--yet if he had but once beheld her eyes answer her lord's as a woman's eyes must answer those of him she loves, it would have driven him mad. And so it came about that to see that she was tender and noble he watched her, and to be sure that she was no more than this he knew he watched her too, calling himself ignoble that Nature so prompted him.

There was a thing she had said to him but a week after the marriage which had sunk deep into his soul and given him comfort.

"From my lord I shall learn new virtues," she said, with a singular smile, which somehow to his mind hid somewhat of pathos. "'New virtues,' say I; all are new to me. At Wildairs we concerned ourselves little with such matters." She lifted her eyes and let them rest upon him with proud gravity. "He is the first good man," she said, "whom I have ever known."

'Twas not as this man observed her life that the world looked on at it, but in a different manner and with a different motive, and yet both the world and his Grace of Osmonde beheld the same thing, which was that my Lord Dunstanwolde's happiness was a thing which grew greater and deeper as time passed, instead of failing him. When she went to Court and set the town on fire with her beauty and her bearing, had her lord been a man of youth and charm matching her own, the grace and sweetness of her manner to him could not have made him a more envied man. The wit and

spirit with which she had ruled her father and his cronies stood her in as good stead as ever in the great World of Fashion, as young beaux and old ones who paid court to her might have told; but of her pungency of speech and pride of bearing when she would punish or reprove, my lord knew nothing, he but knew tones of her voice which were tender, looks which were her loveliest, and most womanly, warm, and sweet.

They were so sweet at times that Osmonde turned his gaze away that he might not see them, and when his Lordship, as was natural, would have talked of her dearness and beauties, he used all his powers to gently draw him from the subject without seeming to lack sympathy. But when a man is the idolatrous slave of happy love and, being of mature years, has few, nay, but one friend young enough to tell his joy to with the feeling that he is within reach of the comprehension of it, 'tis inevitable that to this man he will speak often of that which fills his being.

His Lordship's revealings of himself and his tenderness were involuntary things. There was no incident of his life of which one being was not the central figure, no emotion which had not its birth in her. He was not diffuse or fond to weakness, but full of faithful love and noble carefulness.

"I would not weary her with my worship, Gerald," he said one day, having come to Osmonde House to spend an hour in talk with him. "Let me open my heart to you, which is sometimes too full."

On this morning he gave unconscious explanation of many an incident of the past few years. He spoke of the time when he had found himself wakening to this dream of a new life, yet had not dared to let his thoughts dwell upon it. He had known suffering--remorse that he should be faithless to the memory of his youth, in some hours almost horror of himself, and yet had struggled and approached himself in vain. The night of Lord Twemlow's first visit, when my lord Duke (then my lord Marquis) had been at Dunstanwolde, the occasion upon which Twemlow had so fretted at his fair kinswoman and told the story of the falling of her hair in the hunting-field, he had been disturbed indeed, fearing that his countenance would betray him.

"I was afraid, Gerald; afraid," he said, "thinking it unseemly that a man of my years should be so shaken with love--while your strong youth had gone unscathed. Did I not seem ill at ease?"

"I thought that your lordship disliked the subject," Osmonde answered, remembering well. "Once I thought you pale."

"Yes, yes," said my lord. "I felt my colour change at the cruel picture my Lord Twemlow painted--of her hunted helplessness if harm befell her."

"She would not be helpless," said Osmonde. "Nothing would make her so."

Her lord looked up at him with brightened eye.

"True--true!" he said. "At times, Gerald, I think perhaps you know her better than I. More than once your chance speech of her has shown so clear a knowledge. 'Tis because your spirit is like to her own."

Osmonde arose and went to a cabinet, which he unlocked.

"I have hid here," he said, "somewhat which I must show you. It should be yours--or hers--and has a story."

As his eyes fell upon that his kinsman brought forth his lordship uttered an exclamation. 'Twas the picture of his lady, stolen before her marriage by the drunken painter.

"It is herself," he exclaimed, "herself, though so roughly done."

My lord Duke stood a little apart out of the range of his vision and related the history of the canvas. He had long planned that he would do the thing, and therefore did it. All the plans he had made for his future conduct he had carried out without flinching. There had been hours when he had been like a man who held his hand in a brazier, but he had shown no sign. The canvas had been his companion so long that to send it from him would be almost as though he thrust forth herself while she held her deep eyes fixed upon him. But he told the story of

the garret and the drunken painter, in well-chosen words.

"'Twas but like you, Gerald," my lord said with gratitude. "Few other men would have shown such noble carefulness for a wild beauty they scarce knew. I--will leave it with you."

"You--will leave it!" answered my lord Duke his pulse quickening. "I did not hope for such generosity."

His lordship smiled affectionately. "Yes, 'tis generous," he returned. "I would be so generous with no other man. Kneller paints her for me now, full length, in her Court bravery and with all her diamonds blazing on her. 'Twill be a splendid canvas. And lest you should think me too ready to give this away, I will tell you that I feel the story of the rascal painter would displease her. She hath too high a spirit not to be fretted at the thought of being the unconscious tool of a drunken vagabond."

"Yes, it will anger her," Osmonde said, and ended with a sudden smiling. "Yet I could not keep hidden the beauties of my kinsman's lady, and must tell him."

So the matter ended with friendly smiles and kindness, and the picture was laid back within the cabinet until such time as it should be framed and hung.

"Surely you have learned to love it somewhat in your wanderings?" said the older man with trusting nobleness, standing looking at it, his hand on the other's arm. "You could not help it."

"No, I could not help it," answered Osmonde, and to himself he said, "He will drive me mad, generous soul; he will drive me mad."

His one hope and effort was so to bear himself that the unhappy truth should not be suspected, and so well he played his part that he made it harder for himself to endure. It was not only that he had not betrayed himself either in the past or present by word or deed, but that he had been able to so control himself at worst that he had met his kinsman's eye with a clear glance, and chosen such words of response and sympathy, when circumstances so demanded of him, as were generous and gracious and unconcerned.

"There has risen no faintest shadow in his mind," was his thought. "He loves me, he trusts me, he believes I share his happiness. Heaven give me strength."

But there was a time when it was scarce to be avoided that they should be bidden as guests to Camylott, inasmuch as at this splendid and renowned house my Lord of Dunstanwolde had spent some of his happiest hours, and loved it dearly, never ceasing to speak of its stateliness and beauty to his lady.

"It is the loveliest house in England, my lady," he would say, "and Gerald loves it with his whole soul. I think he loves it as well, and almost in such manner as he will some day love her who is his Duchess. Know you that he and I walked together in the noted Long Gallery, on the day I told him the story of your birth?"

My lady turned with sudden involuntary movement and met my lord Duke's eyes (curiously seldom their eyes met, as curiously seldom as if each pair avoided the other). Some strange emotion was in her countenance and rich colour mounted her cheek.

"How was that, my lord?" she asked. "'Twas a strange story, as I have heard it--and a sad one."

"He was but fourteen," said Dunstanwolde, "yet its cruelty set his youthful blood on fire. Never shall I forget how his eyes flashed and he bit his boyish lip, crying out against the hardness of it. 'Is there justice,' he said, 'that a human thing can be cast into the world and so left alone?'"

"Your Grace spoke so," said her ladyship to Osmonde, "while you were yet so young?" and the velvet of her eyes seemed to grow darker.

"It was a bitter thing," said Osmonde. "There was no justice in it."

"Nay, that there was not," my lady said, very low.

"'Twas ordained that you two should be kinsman and kinswoman," said Dunstanwolde. "He was moved by stories of your house when he was yet a child, and he was ever anxious to hear of your ladyship's first years, and later, when I longed for a confidant, though he knew it not, I talked to him often, feeling that he alone of all I knew could understand you."

Her ladyship stood erect and still, her eyes downcast, as she slowly stripped a flower of its petals one by one. My lord Duke watched her until the last flame-coloured fragment fell, when she looked up and gazed into his face with a strange, tragic searching.

"Then you have known me long, your Grace?" she said.

He bowed his head, not wishing that his voice should at that moment be heard.

"Since your ladyship was born," said her lord, happy that these two he loved so well should feel they were not strangers. "Together we both saw you in the hunting-field--when you were but ten years old."

Her eyes were still upon his--he felt that his own gazed into strange depths of her. The crimson had fallen away from her beauteous cheeks and she faintly, faintly smiled--almost, he thought, as if she mocked at somewhat, woefully.

"Then--then you might have been one of those," she said, slow and soft,
"who came to the birthnight feast and--and saw my life begin."

And she bent down as if she scarce knew what she did, and slowly
gathered up one by one the torn petals she had broken from her flower.

"Then you will ask us to come to visit you at Camylott, Gerald?" said
my lord later after they had talked further, he speaking of the
beauties of the place and the loveliness of the country about it.

"It will be my joy and honour to be your host," Osmonde answered.

"Since my parents' death I have not entertained guests, but had
already thought of doing so this year, and could have no better reason
for hospitality than my wish to place my house at your ladyship's
service," with a bow, "and make you free of it--as of every other roof
of mine."