

CHAPTER XX

At Camylott

A month later the flag floated from Camylott Tower and the village was all alive with rustic excitement, much ale being drunk at the Plough Horse and much eager gossip going on between the women, who had been running in and out of each other's cottages for three days to talk over each item of news as it reached them. Since the new Duke had taken possession of his inheritance there had been no rejoicing or company at the Tower, all the entertaining rooms having been kept closed, and the great house seeming grievously quiet even when his Grace came down to spend a few weeks in it. To himself the silence had been a sorrowful thing, but he had no desire to break it by filling the room with guests, and had indeed resolved in private thought not to throw open its doors until he brought to it a mistress. The lovely presence of the last mistress it had known had been so brightly illuminating a thing, filling its rooms and galleries and the very park and terraces and gardens themselves with sunshine and joyousness. In those happy days no apartment had seemed huge and empty, no space too great to warm and light with homely pleasure. But this fair torch extinguished, apartments large enough for royal banquets, labyrinths of corridors and galleries leading to chambers enough to serve a garrison, seemed all the more desolate for their size and splendour, and in them their owner had suffered a sort of homesickness. 'Twas a strange thing to pass

through the beautiful familiar places now that they were all thrown open and adorned for the coming guests, reflecting that the gala air was worn for her who should, Fate willing, have made her first visit as mistress, and realising that Fate had not been willing and that she came but as a guest and Countess of Dunstanwolde. Oh, it was a bitter, relentless thing; and why should it have been--for what wise purpose or what cruel one? And with a maddening clutch about his heart he saw again the tragic searching in her eyes when she had said, "Then you have known me long, your Grace," and afterwards, so soft and strangely slow, "Then you might have been one of those who came to my birthnight feast, and saw my life begin."

He might have been, Heaven knew. Good God, why had he not? Why had he gone back to Flanders? Now it seemed to his mind the folly of a madman, and yet at the time he had felt his duty to his house commanded that he should not give way to the rising tempest of his passion, but should at least wait a space that time might prove that he could justly trust the honour of his name and the fortune of his peoples into this wild, lovely being's hands. Had he been free from all responsibilities, free enough to feel that he risked no happiness but his own, and by his act could wrong none other than himself, he would not have waited to see what time wrought but have staked his future life upon this die. He had denied himself and waited, and here he stood in the Long Gallery, and 'twas thrown open and adorned for the coming of my Lady Dunstanwolde.

"I meant an honest thing," he said, gazing out over his fair domain

through a dark mist, it seemed to him. "All my life I have meant honestly. Why should a man's life go wrong because he himself would act right?"

The flag fluttered and floated from the battlements of the tower, the house was beautiful in its air of decorated order and stateliness, glowing masses of flowers lighted every corner, and tall exotic plants stood guard about; the faces of lord and lady, dame and knight, in the pictures seemed to look downward with a waiting gaze. Outside, terraces and parterres were wonders of late summer brilliancy of bloom, and the sunshine glowed over all. On the high road from town at this hour the cavalcades of approaching guests must ride in coach or chariot or on horseback. When the equipage of the Earl and his Countess passed through Camylott village, old Rowe would ring a welcoming peal. But my lord Duke stood still at the window of the Long Gallery where he had said his tender farewell to his beloved mother before she had left her home. He was thinking of a grave thing and feeling that the violet eyes rested upon him again in a soft passion of pity. The thing he thought of was that which, when his eyes met my Lady Dunstanwolde's, made the blood pulse through his veins; 'twas that he had known he should some day see in some woman's eyes, and had told himself would be answer to the question his being asked; 'twas that he had prayed God he might see, ay, and had believed and sworn to himself he should see--in this woman's when he came back to stand face to face with her as lover, if she would. Well, he had come and seen it, and 'twas in the eyes and soul of her who was to be his kinsman's wife. And never since he had

been man born had he beheld the faintest glimmering of its glow in any woman's eyes, though they had been like pools of love or stars of Heaven, never yet! Moreover, he knew well that he never should again behold it in any hour to come. Before its fire his soul shook and his body trembled; 'twas a thing which drew him with a power no human being could explain the strength of or describe; had he been weak or evil, and she evil, too, it would have dragged him to her side through crime and hell; he could not have withstood it.

He saw again the sudden pallor of his mother's sweet face, the sudden foreboding in her eyes.

"If you loved her 'twould drive you mad and make you forget what you must be."

"Yes," he cried, putting his hand suddenly to his brow, feeling it damp, "it has driven me mad, I think--mad. I am not the same man! The torture is too great. I could--I could--nay! nay!" with half a shudder.

"Let me not forget, mother; let me not forget."

Through this visit he must be a gracious host; a score of other guests would aid him by sharing his attentions; her ladyship, as new wedded bride, would be the central figure of the company. Her lord's love for him and unconsciousness of any suspicion of the truth would put him to the test many a time, but he would keep his word to himself, the vow he made to avoid nearness to her when 'twas to be done with any

graciousness, and her eyes he would not meet in more than passing gaze if he could be master of his own.

"If I look straightly at her my own gaze will speak, and she, who is so shrewd of wit and has seen such worship in men's faces, will read and understand, and disdain me, or--disdain me not. God knows which would be worse."

The visit over, he would visit other of his estates, engage himself with friends to be their guests in Scotland, Ireland, and Wales, at their châteaux in France or Spain--everywhere. When he was not thus absorbed he would give himself to a statesman's work at the settling of great questions--the more involved and difficult the better; party enmity would be good for him, the unravelling of webs of intrigue, the baffling of cabals would keep his thoughts in action, and leave him no time for dreams. Yes, to mark out his days thus clearly would help him to stand steady upon his feet--in time might aid in deadening the burning of the wound which would not close. Above all, to Warwickshire he would not go--Dunstan's Wolde must see him no more, and Dunstanwolde

House in town he would gradually visit less and less often, until his kinsman ceased to expect the old familiarity, believing his many duties kept him away. In his happiness he would have but little time to miss him seriously, perhaps even to remember that his presence had been once so much less rare a thing.

"'Son,' he once loved to call me," he thought, with a sharp pang. "He is an old man, 'tis true, but Heaven may give him a son of his own."

Even as the thought crossed his mind--as a flame of lightning crosses a black sky--he heard old Rowe begin to ring his peal, and soon--or it seemed soon to him--the first party of arrivals wound through the park, now and then its colours gleaming through an opening in the trees. There were mounted and safely armed servitors riding in attendance to guard the big travelling-coach with its six strong, finely bred horses. In this the Earl and his Countess sate, the lady a little pale, from the fatigue of her journey, perhaps; following them came another vehicle, substantial but less splendid than their own equipage, in it, my lady's two Abigails and the gentleman of his lordship carrying the iron jewel-box secreted in a special hiding-place beneath the seat, for the baffling of highwaymen, if any such were bold enough to attack a party so well attended by sturdy strength and shining arms. When she had stepped forth across the threshold of her town house, attended by subservient lacqueys bowing in line on either side, the Countess had faintly smiled, and when they had entered their coach and the door been closed upon them, she had turned this smile with a sweet archness upon her lord.

"I smile, my Lord," she said, "to think what a great lady your goodness has made of me, and how in these days I ride forth, and how in the past, when I was but Clo Wildairs our old chariot lumbered like a house on wheels, and its leather hung in flaps, and the farm horses pulled it

lurching from side to side, and old Bartlemy had grown too portly for his livery and cursed when it split as he rolled in his seat." And her laugh rang out as if it were a chime of bells, and her lord, laughing with her--but for joy in her arch gayety--adored her.

"If any had told the county then that I would one day ride forth like this," says she, "from Dunstanwolde House to pay visit to a Duke at Camylott, who could have believed it? I would not myself. And 'tis you who have given me all, my dear lord," laying her soft hand in his.

"You, Edward, and I am full of gratefulness."

What wonder that he was a happy man, he who had hoped for so little and had found so much, since she did not think--as a slighter woman might--that her youth and beauty paid for and outweighed his richest gifts, but was heavenly kind and dutiful and tender, giving him of her brightest humours and prettiest playfulness and gentlest womanly thought, and receiving his offerings, not as her mere right, but as signals of his generousness and tender love for her.

"Look, my lady!" he cried, as they drove up the avenue, "see what a noble house it is; there is no other, in all England, of its size and beauty. And Gerald waits to receive us with no Duchess at his side."

Her ladyship leaned forward to look, and gazed a moment in silence.

"There should be one," she cried, "to reign over such a place, and to

be happy in it."

The village saw gayety enough to turn its head in the two weeks that followed. The flag floated from the tower every day, coaches rolled past the village green laden with the county gentry who came to pay their respects, gay cavalcades rode down the avenue and through the big gates to gallop over the country with joyous laughter and talk; at the Plough Horse, Mr. Mount, who had grown too old for service, but had been pensioned and was more fond of fine stories than ever, added to his importance as a gentleman of quality by describing the banquets at the Towers, the richness of the food, the endless courses, the massiveness of the gold plate, the rareness of the wines, and the magnificence of the costumes of the guests.

"There are fine women there," he would say, removing his long churchwarden's pipe from his mouth and waving it to give emphasis. "In my day I have seen King Charles at Hampton Court--my Lady Castlemaine, and Mistress Frances Stewart, who married a Duke and had her eyes put out by smallpox and her face spoiled forever, poor soul; and De Querouaille--the one you will call Carwell, which is not her name, but a French one--and Mazarin--and all could see Nell Gwynne who could pay for a seat in the play-house--so I may well be a judge of women--and have lived gayly myself about the Court. But there is one--this moment at Camylott Towers--there is one," describing a great circle with his pipe as if he writ her name, "and may the devil seize and

smite me, if there was ever a lady with such a body and face on earth before."

"Tis the tall one with the flashing black eyes," cried out Will Bush the first night that he said it. "Me and my dame saw her through the glass of the coach the day they drove over the green with all their servants come to follow them from Lunnon town with pistols and hangers. And what think you? says I to Joan, 'Ecod,' says I, 'there's the woman for our own Duke, and matches him for size and beauty!' And says Joan, staring: 'Lord a mercy, so she is and does!'"

"Village folk," said Mr. Mount with decorum, "are not the ones to take upon themselves the liberty to say who will suit a Duke or who will not suit him. But this I will say to you, that for once you were not so far wrong; I having said the same thing myself. And his Grace is a single man, whom they say loves no woman--and my lady has a husband near seventy years of age. So things go!"

To her husband and lord, this lady seemed for all her powers, the sweetest, frank creature in the world, and indeed in all matters which concerned their united life she was candour itself. But there was a thing in her mind--and 'twas in her thought every day--of which, though she was within his sight almost every waking hour and her head lay upon the pillow by his own, when she slept, he knew nothing. In gaining grace of manner and bearing she had not lost her old quickness of sight and alertness of mind; if any felt that her eyes were less keen, her

perception less acute, their error was a grave one. Beneath the majesty of her Ladyship of Dunstanwolde lay all the fire and flaming spirit, the swiftness to deduce and act, which had set Clo Wildairs apart from lesser women. So it was that she had not been three hours at Camylott before she knew that, with regard to herself, my Lord Duke of Osmonde had made some strong resolve. No other than herself could have detected, she knew, but on her first glance at his face she beheld it written there. There are human beings, it is sure, whose natures are so attuned that the thoughts, the griefs, the passions of each are reflected upon the brain of the other; and 'twas thus with these two whom life thrust so far apart from one another and yet forced so near. At their first meeting on the threshold and in the midst of his warm and gracious welcome she read what none other could read, and felt a pang which yet was gladness. 'Twas better so--her strength should aid his own, his greatness should support her. There was no question in her mind, no argument, only a sudden recognition of the truth that up to this time she had scarcely allowed herself mere thought in connection with him, that--after the first hour--when thought had risen she had thrust it back, forbidden its being, denied its presence.

"Thought will not help," she had said once, when, as she had sate alone, she had felt hot, passionate tears start to her eyes, and she had flung down her book, risen from her chair, and left the room ten minutes later, riding forth from the court followed by her groom and making for the country roads.

From the earliest days of her marriage she had herself avoided often meeting his gaze. Glances would not help either, but would do harm and betray--between those who are drawn together as by some force of Nature, glances are mad things. They may begin calmly, they may swear that they will so continue, but looks entangle one day and catch fire, and, once alight, the flame cannot extinguish itself, even when it would.

At Camylott each was gracious to the other, he gracious host, she gracious guest and kinswoman, and those who looked on praised each one and honoured, speaking often of their charm and courtly friendliness, which indeed made them seem almost like brother and sister.

"They are a strange pair, those two fine creatures," said the old Dowager Storms one day to her favourite crony, an elderly matron to whom she could safely talk gossip. "But look at them." (They were with the whole party at racquets in the court, and my lord Duke, having made a splendid stroke, glowing and laughing bowed in response to a round of applause.) "Is there a husband at Court--though he were not thirty-five--who has reason to feel as safe as the old Earl Dunstanwolde may--when his wife is guest to such a pretty fellow as he?" nodding her head towards his Grace. "Never in my days saw I a thing so out of nature! 'Tis as though they were not flesh and blood, but--but of some stuff we are not made of. 'Tis but human he should make sly love to her, and her eyes wander after him despite herself wheresoever he goes. All know how a woman's eyes will follow a man, and

his hers, but when these look at each other 'tis steadfast honesty that looks out of them--and 'tis scarce to be understood."