

CHAPTER XXII

My Lady Dunstanwolde is Widowed

There was a lady came back to town with the Earl and Countess, on their return from Dunstan's Wolde, to which place they had gone after his lordship's illness at Camylott. This lady was one of the two elder sisters of her ladyship of Dunstanwolde, and 'twas said was her favourite and treated with great tenderness by her. She was but a thin, humble little woman--Mistress Anne Wildairs--and singularly plain and timid to be the sister and chosen companion of one so brilliant and full of fire. She was a pale creature with dull-hued heavy hair and soft dull eyes, which followed her ladyship adoringly whensoever it chanced they were in a room together.

"How can two beings so unlike be of the same blood?" people said; "and what finds my lady in her that she does not lose patience at her plainness and poor spirit?"

What she discovered in her, none knew as she herself did; but my Lord Dunstanwolde understood the tie between them, and so his Grace of Osmonde did, since an occasion when he had had speech with her ladyship upon the subject.

"I love her," she said, with one of her strange, almost passionate,

looks. "'Tis thought I can love neither man nor woman. But that I can do, and without change; but I must love a thing not slight nor common. Anne was the first creature to teach me what love meant. Before, I had never seen it. She was afraid of me and often thought I mocked at her, but I was learning from her pureness--from her pureness," she added, saying the words the second time in a lower voice and almost as if to herself. And then the splendid sweet of her smile shone forth. "She is so white--good Anne," she said. "She is a saint and does not know I pray to her to intercede for me, and that I live my life hoping that some day I may make it as fair as hers. She does not know, and I dare not tell her, for she would be made afraid."

To Mistress Anne she seemed in truth a goddess. Until taken under her protection, the poor woman had lived a lonely life, starved of all pleasures and affections. At first--'twas in the days when she had been but Clo Wildairs--her ladyship had begun to befriend her through a mere fanciful caprice, being half-amused, half-touched, to find her, by sheer chance, one day, stolen into her chambers to gaze in delighted terror at some ball finery spread upon a bed. To Mistress Clorinda the frightened creature had seemed a strange thing in her shy fearfulness, and she had for an hour amused herself and then suddenly been vaguely moved, and from that time had been friends with her.

"Perhaps I had no heart then, or 'twas not awake," said her ladyship. "I was but a fierce, selfish thing, like a young she-wolf. Is a young she-wolf honest?" with a half-laugh. "I was that, and feared nothing. I

ate and drank and sang and hunted poor beasts for my pleasure, and was as wild as one of them myself. When I look back!"--she flung up a white hand in a strange gesture--"When I look back!"

"Look forward!" said my lord Duke; "'tis the nobler thing."

"Yes," she repeated after him, fixing her great eyes gravely on his face and speaking slowly. "'Tis sure the nobler thing."

And then he heard from her how, day by day, poor Anne had revealed to her things strange--unselfishness, humble and tender love, and sweet patience.

"At first I but wondered," she said, "and sate and would stare at her while she talked. And then I pitied her who was so meek, and then I was angered at Fortune, which had been so careless of her, and being a rebel I began to defy Fate for her and swear I would set its cruelty at naught and make her happy. Always," with quick leap of light in her eyes, "I have hated that they call Fate, and defied it. There is a thing in me," her closed hand on her breast, "which will not be beat down! It will not. If 'tis evil, Heaven help me--for it will not. But Anne"--and she smiled again, her face changing as it always did when she spoke her sister's name--"Anne I began to love and could not help it, and she was the first."

This gentlewoman my lord Duke did not for some time see but on rare

occasions, at a distance. In her ladyship's great gilt coach he saw her once or twice--a small, shrinking figure seated by her sister's side, the modest pale brown of her lutestring robe a curious contrast to my lady's velvets and brocades; at the play-house he saw her seated in the Countess' box, at which a score of glasses were levelled, her face lighted with wonder and pleasure at the brighter moments of the tragedy, her soft eyes full of tears when the curtain fell upon the corpse-strewn stage. If Mistress Anne had known that so great a gentleman looked at her gentle face and with an actual tenderness near to love itself, she would indeed have been a startled woman, yet 'twas with a feeling like to this his Grace regarded her, thinking of her in time as a sort of guardian angel. The sweetest words he had ever heard from the lips of her he worshipped with such sad and hopeless passion, were words spoken of Mistress Anne; the sweetest strange smile he had ever seen her wear was worn when she spoke of this meek sister; the sweetest womanly deeds he knew of her performing were thoughtful gentlenesses done for the cherishing and protection of Anne. "Anne was the first creature to teach me what love meant," she said.

"I could have taught you, Heart," was his secret thought; "I could have taught you, but since I might not, God's blessing on this dear soul whose tender humbleness was your first lesson." Yet Mistress Anne he did not encounter in person until the occurring of the sad event which changed for him the whole face of the universe itself, and which took place a year or more after his kinsman's marriage. The resolution his Grace had made the day he waited at Camylott for his guests' arrival,

he had kept to the letter, and this often to the wonder of his lordship of Dunstanwolde, who found cause for regret at the rareness of his visits to his lady and himself under their own roof. Other visits my lord Duke had made, as he had planned, passing from one great house to another in Great Britain, or making stay at the estates of his friends upon the continent of Europe. Sometimes he was in Scotland, sometimes in Ireland or Wales, hunting, salmon-fishing, the chief guest at great reunions, everywhere discussed and envied his freedom from any love affair, entanglement, or connection with scandal, always a thing which awakened curiosity.

"The world will have you married, Gerald," said Dunstanwolde. "And 'tis no wonder! My lady and I would find you a Duchess. I think she looks for one for you, but finds none to please her taste. She would have a wondrous consort for you. You do wrong to roam so. You should come to Dunstan's Wolde that she may have you beneath her eye."

But to Dunstan's Wolde he did not go--not even when, in obedience to her lord's commands, the Countess herself besought him with gracious hospitality.

To their town house he went but seldom, pleading as reason, affairs which occupied his time, journeys which removed him to other parts. But to refuse to cross the threshold was impossible; accordingly there were times when he must make visits of ceremony, and on one such occasion he found her ladyship alone, and she conveyed to him her husband's message

and his desire that she herself should press his invitation.

'Twas upon a winter afternoon, and when my lord Duke was announced he entered the saloon, to behold my lady sitting by the firelight in a carven gilded chair, her eyes upon the glowing coals, her thoughts plainly preoccupied. On hearing his name she slightly started, and on his entry rose and gave him her soft warm hand, which he did not kiss because its velvet so wooed him that he feared to touch it with his lips. 'Twas not a hand which he could touch with simple courtesy, but must long to kiss passionately, and over and over again, and hold close with whispered words.

"My lord has but just left me," she said. "He will be almost angry at the chance which led him to go before your coming. The last hour of our talk was all of your Grace;" and she sat upright against the high back of her chair. And why was it that, while she sat so straight and still, he felt that she held herself as one who needs support? "The last hour of our talk was all of you," she said again, and oh, the velvet of her eyes was asking him for some aid, some mercy; and his soul leaped in anguish as he saw it. "He says I must beguile you to be less formal with us. Before our marriage, he tells me, your Grace came often to Dunstan's Wolde, and now you seem to desert us."

"No, no!" exclaimed my lord Duke, as if involuntarily, and rose from his seat and stood looking down into the fire.

"I told him you would exclaim so!" said my lady, and her low-pitched voice was a thing to make a man tremble. "I know your Grace loves him--I think any heart must love him----"

My lord Duke turned and looked at her. Their eyes rested on each other and spoke.

"I thank your Ladyship," he said, "that you so understood. I pray you let him not think I could at any time feel less tender of his goodness."

But what his whole being impelled him to, was to throw himself upon his knees before her like a boy, to lay his face upon her little hands which rested open upon her lap, and to cry to her that there were hours when he could bear no more. And could it have been that if he had so done she would have bent her dear head and wept--for her voice, when she answered him, had surely tears in it.

"I will not let him think so," she said. "A heart as full of gentleness and warmth as his must not be chilled. I will use all my power. Your Grace has much to do about the Queen at this time of disturbance and cabal. Her Grace of Marlborough's angers, the intrigues of Harley and St. John, the quarrels of Mrs. Masham, make such a turmoil that you, whom her Majesty loves, must be preoccupied." She laid a hand softly upon her breast. "He will believe all that I say," she said. "His kindness is so great to me."

"He loves you," said my lord Duke, his voice low and grave. "You are so generous and noble a lady to him."

"He is so generous and noble a husband," my Lady Dunstanwolde answered. "He thinks I need but ask a favour to find it granted. 'Twas because he thinks so that he begged me to myself speak with you, to ask you to come to Warwickshire next week when we go there. I--have asked you."

"With most sweet graciousness," my lord Duke answered her. "That I myself will tell him." And then he stepped to her side and lifted the fair hand and kissed it very reverently, and without either speaking another word he turned and went away.

"But I do no wrong," he groaned to himself as he walked in a private room of his own house afterwards. "I do no wrong if I go not near her--if I have no speech with her that is not formal courtesy--if I only look on her when she does not know that I am near. And in seeing her, in the mere beholding of her dear face, there is a poor comfort which may hold a man from madness--as a prisoner shut in a dungeon to perish of thirst, might save himself from death if he found somewhere in the blackness a rare falling drop and could catch it as it fell."

So it befel that many a time he saw her when she was in nowise aware of his nearness. All her incomings and outgoings he found a way to learn,

when she left town for the country, and when she returned, what fêtes and assemblies she would attend, at what Court gathering she would shine, at which places it would be possible that he might mingle with the crowd and seem to be but where 'twas natural he should appear, if his presence was observed. To behold her sweep by in her chariot, to feel the heart leap which announced her coming, to catch a view of her crimson cheek, a fleeting glance and bow as she passed by, was at least to feel her in the same world with himself, to know that her pulse was beating still, her deep eyes still alight, her voice still music, and she a creature of love, though not for himself.

His Grace of Marlborough, returning to England after Malplaquet, himself worn with the fierce strain of war, tossed on the changing waves of public feeling, one hour the people's idol the next doubted and reproached, was in such mood as made him keen of perception and of feeling.

"Years mark changes in a man, my lord Duke," he said when first they talked alone, "even before they line his face or pale his bloom of health. Since we met you have seen some hours you had not seen when I beheld you last. And yet"--with ironic bitterness--"you are not battling with intrigues of Court and State, with the ingratitude of a nation and the malice of ladies of the royal bedchamber. 'Tis only the man who has won England's greatest victories for her who must contend with such things as these."

"Mrs. Masham has no enmity against me," said Osmonde. "I have no power she would take from me."

"And no wife she would displace about the throne," his Grace added. "The world waits to behold your Duchess still?"

"'Tis I who wait," said Osmonde, gravely.

There was a pause, and while it lasted, Marlborough gazed at him with a thought dawning in his eye.

"You have seen her," he said at last, in a low voice.

Osmonde remained silent. A moment before he had risen, and so stood. The man who regarded him experienced at the moment a singular thing, feeling that it was singular, and vaguely asking himself why. It was a sudden new realisation of his physical perfection. His tall, great body was so complete in grace and strength, each line and muscle of it so fine a thing. In the workings of such a physical being there could be no flaw. There was such beauty in his countenance, such strength and faithful sweetness in his firm, full mouth, such pure, strong passion in the deeps of his large, kind, human eye. The handsomest and the tallest man in England he might be, but he was something more--a complete noble human thing, to whom it surely seemed that nature should be kind, since he had so honoured and done reverence to the gifts she had bestowed upon him. 'Twas this his illustrious companion saw and was

moved by.

"You have seen her," he said, "but--since you wear that look which I can read--something has come between. Had you two bared hearts to each other for but one hour, as 'twas ordained you should, you would stand before me so happy a man that none could pass you by and not turn to behold again the glow of the flame of joy burning within your soul."

My Lord Duke of Osmonde drew a long, deep breath as he listened, looking down upon the ground.

"Yes," he said, "'twould have been so."

But he spoke no further on the subject, nor did his Grace of Marlborough, for suddenly there came to him a certain memory--which was that he had heard that the beautiful wild creature who had set Gloucestershire on fire had made a great marriage, her bridegroom being the Earl of Dunstanwolde, who was the Duke of Osmonde's kinsman. And it was she he himself had felt was born to mate with this man, and had spoke of it in Flanders, finding my lord Duke had seen her at a distance but had not encountered her in any company. And at last it seemed that they had met, but not until she had given herself to another.

That night as he drove homeward after an interview with the Queen at Kensington his coach rolled through a street where was a great house

standing alone in a square garden. 'Twas a house well known for its size and massive beauty, and he leaned forward to glance at it, for no other reason than his remembrance that it was the home of his lordship of Dunstanwolde, that fact, in connection with the incident of the morning, wakening in him a vague interest.

"'Tis there she reigns Queen," he said, "with her old lord worshipping at her feet as old lords will at the feet of young wives and beauties. Poor gentleman--though she is kind to him, they say. But if 'twere the other man--Good God!" As he uttered the exclamation he drew back within the coach. 'Twas long past midnight and the lights of Dunstanwolde House were extinguished, but in the dark on the opposite side of the street there walked a tall figure wrapped in a long cloak.

"There is no other gentleman of such inches and so straight," his Grace said. "Good Lord! how a man can suffer in such case, and how we are all alike--schoolboys, scullions, or Dukes--and must writhe and yearn and feel we are driven mad, and can find no help but only to follow and look at her, yards away, or crush to one's lips a rag of ribband or a flower, or pace the night away before her darkened house while she lies asleep. He is the finest man-thing I have ever known--and yet there is no other way for him--and he will walk there half the night, his throat full of mad sobs, which he does not know for sobs, because he is not woman but tortured man."

Many a night the same figure had walked there in the darkness. As his

great friend had said, there was no other way. His pain had grown no less, but only more as the months passed by, for it was not the common pain of a man like others. As he was taller, stronger, and had more brain and heart than most, he had greater and keener pangs to do battle with, and in the world he must at intervals be thrown across her path and she across his, and as he had been haunted by talk and rumours of her in the years before he was haunted now. 'Twas but natural all should praise to him his kinsman's wife, sure that he would feel pleasure when he heard her lauded.

Women, especially such as are great ladies, have not at their command, if they hide pain in secret, even the refuges and poor comforts possessed by men. They may not feed their hungry souls by gazing at a distance upon the beloved object of their heavy thoughts; they cannot pace the night through before a dwelling, looking up as they pass at the darkened windows behind which sleeps--or wakes--the creature their hearts cry to in their pain; tears leave traces; faces from which smiles are absent, eyes from which light has fled, arouse query and comment. My lord has a certain privacy and license to be dull or gloomy, but my lady cannot well be either without explaining herself, either by calling in a physician or wearing mourning, or allowing the world to gain some hint of domestic trouble or misfortune.

Her ladyship of Dunstanwolde was surely a happy woman. Having known neither gayety nor luxury in her girlhood, it seemed now that she could give her lord no greater pleasure than to allow him to surround her

with both.

"She is more dazzling than they said," my Lord Marlborough thought, watching her at the tragedy one night, "but she carries with her a thought of something she would forget in the gayeties of the world."

The Duke of Osmonde sate in his own box that night and in the course of the play went to his kinsman's for a few moments and paid his respects to her ladyship, who received him graciously. This his Grace of Marlborough beheld but did not mark her soft quick aside to him.

"May I ask your Grace's aid?" she said. "Look at my lord. His kindness to me will not let him own that he is ailing. He will not remain at home from these festivities because he knows I would remain with him. I beg you persuade him that he is wrong and but makes me unhappy. Your Grace will do this?"

"Your Ladyship may trust me," was his answer. 'Twas then that his Grace of Marlborough saw him turn from her with a bow and go to sit by her husband, who, 'twas indeed true, looked this night older than his years, and was of an ivory pallor and worn. 'Twas at this time the Duke marked that there stood upon the stage among the company of men of fashion, idlers, and young fops sitting and lounging there, a man attired in peach-coloured velvet, whose delicacy of bloom, combining itself with the fair curls which fell upon his shoulders, made him look pale and haggard. He was a young man and a handsome one, but had the

look of an ill liver, and as he stood in a careless, insolent attitude he gazed steadfastly and with burning eyes at my Lady Dunstanwolde.

"There is somewhat devilish in his air," his Grace thought. "It is some dissolute dandy in love with her and raging against her in his soul. Heaven's grace! how she sits and gazes past his impudent face with her great eyes as if he were not a living thing! She will not see him, and he cannot force her to it, she so holds herself in hand."

My Lord Dunstanwolde gave heed to his kinsman's affectionate appeals and counsellings with the look of a man tenderly moved.

"Has my dear lady asked you to talk with me?" he said. "'Tis but like her generous observance of me. She has cautioned me most tenderly herself, and begs me to leave the gayeties of town and go with her to the country, where she says we will be happy together and she will be my nurse."

"She will be happier with you at Dunstan's Wolde than she can be here, where she is concerned about your health," returned Osmonde. "That I can see plainly. The whirl of town festivities but torments her when she sees you worn and pale."

"Yes," answered my lord with a very tender smile, "I am sure it is true, and there is one lovely young lady with the world at her feet who is heavenly sweet enough to give her youth and bloom willingly to the

care of an old husband."

"'Tis to the care of noble tenderness and love she is willing to give herself," said Osmonde. "She is a Woman--a Woman!"

His lordship of Dunstanwolde turned and looked at him with a curious interest.

"Gerald," he said, "'tis singular that you should speak so, though you say so true a thing. Only a few weeks since he and I spoke of yourself, and her own words of you were those: 'He is a Man--he is a Man. Nay, he is as God meant Man should be.' And she added that if men were so, there would be women great enough to be their mates and give the world men like them. And now--you are both right, Gerald; both right. Sometimes I think--" He broke his sentence with a sigh and began quick again. "I will obey you," he said; "after the assembly we hold next week we will go to Dunstan's Wolde. You will be with us that last night, Gerald?"

Osmonde bowed, smiling. 'Twas to be a great assembly, at which Royalty would be entertained, and of such stateliness and ceremony that his absence would have been a thing to be marked.

"Her ladyship has chided me for giving so great an entertainment," said the Earl. "She is very quaint in her play at wifely scolding. Truth is, I am an uxorious husband, and before we leave town would see her a last

time all regal and blazing with her newest jewels; reigning over my hospitalities like a Queen. 'Tis a childish thing, no doubt, but perhaps--perhaps--" he broke his sentence again with a sigh which he changed to a smile. "You will be there," he said, "and you will understand the meaning of my weakness."

On the night of this great assembly at Dunstanwolde House, Mr. Hammond, my lord Duke's confidential secretary, and the Comptroller of his household, sate late over his accounts. He was his Grace's attached servant, and having been in his service since he had left the University had had time and opportunity to develop a strong affection for him, and a deep and even intimate interest in his concerns. 'Twas not alone an interest in the affairs of his estate, but in himself and all that touched or moved him. This being the case he also, as well as a greater man, had marked a subtle change in his patron, though wherein its nature lay he could scarcely have described even to himself.

"He is not so calm a creature," he had said to himself, striving to make analysis of what he thought he saw. "He is not so happy. At times when he sits in silence he looks like a man doing battle with himself. Yet what could there be for such as he to combat with?"

He had thought of this very thing when he had seen his Grace pass to his coach which was to bear him to the entertainment at his kinsman's house. The man, who had grown used to silent observance of him, had

seen in his face the thing he deplored, while he did not comprehend it.

At midnight he sate in his room, which adjoined his Grace's study, and in which he was ever within call.

"'Tis a thing perhaps none but a woman could understand," he said to himself in quiet thought.

The clock began to strike twelve. One--two--three--four--five--six--

But the rest he did not hear. The coach-wheels were to be heard rolling into the courtyard. His Grace was returning. Mr. Hammond rose from his work, prepared to answer a summons should he hear one. In but a few minutes he was called and entered the adjoining room.

My lord Duke was standing in the centre of the apartment. He looked like a man who had met with a shock. The colour had fled from his countenance, and his eyes were full of pain.

"Hammond," he said, "a great and sudden calamity has taken place. An hour ago my Lord Dunstanwolde was struck down--in the midst of his company--by a fatal seizure of the heart."

"Fatal, your Grace?" Mr. Hammond ejaculated.

"He did not breathe after he fell," was my lord Duke's answer, and his

pallor became even more marble-like than before, as if an added coldness had struck him. "He was a dead man when I laid my hand upon his heart."