

CHAPTER XXIII

Her Ladyship Returns to Town

Upon the awful occasion of his kinsman's sudden death in the midst of the glittering throng of his guests, my lord Duke had spoken for the first time to her ladyship of Dunstanwolde's sister, the gentle Mistress Anne. His Grace had chanced to encounter this lady under such circumstances as naturally led them to address each other, and he being glad to have speech with her on whom his thoughts had dwelt so kindly, had remained in attendance upon her, escorting her through the crowd of celebrities and leading her to the supper-room for refreshment. Had she been wholly a stranger to him, she was one who would have appealed to his heart and touched it, she was so slight and modest a creature, her eyes so soft and loving and her low voice so timid. Such women always moved him and awakened in him that tenderness the weak should always waken in the strong. But Mistress Anne did more; seeming to him, when she spoke of her sister or looked at her, surely the fondest creature Nature had ever made.

"I understand now," his Grace had said to her as they talked, "why her ladyship says that 'twas you who first taught her what love meant."

A soft colour flooded Mistress Anne's whole face as she lifted it to look at him who stood so tall above her smallness.

"Did she so?" she exclaimed. "Did she so?" And her soft dull eyes seemed about to fill with tears.

"Truly she did, madam," he answered with warm feeling, "and added, too, that until you taught her she had never before beheld it."

"I--oh, I am grateful!" said Mistress Anne. "I never dreamed that I--But in these days, she hath a way of always saying that which makes one happy."

"She loves and leans on you," my lord Duke said, and there was sudden emotion in his voice.

"Leans!" cried Mistress Anne with a kind of loving fright; "Anne--on Anne!"

"Yes, yes," he answered. "I have seen it--felt it! Your pardon for my boldness. You will never forget!"

And at that very moment his attention had been caught by the look on his kinsman's face--they chancing to be near his lordship; and he had seen him sway and fall in the midst of a terrified group, which uttered a low simultaneous cry.

After his attendance at the funeral ceremonies, which took place in Warwickshire, his Grace of Osmonde did not return at once to town, but went to Camylott that in the midst of the quiet loveliness he might be alone.

"I must have time to think," he said; "to still my brain which whirls--to teach it to understand."

Oh! the heavenly stillness and beauty of the afternoon when he rode up the avenue on his home-coming! His home-coming! Yes, 'twas that he called it in his thought, and for the first time since his parents' death it seemed so. In the tenderness of his heart and for the sake of his long and true love for his dead kinsman, he scarce dared explain to himself why he now could use this word and could not before--and yet, he felt that in the depths of his being the thought lay that at last he was coming home.

"God forgive me if there is lack of kindness in it," he cried to himself. "Kinsman, forgive me! Nay, you know now and will have pity. I am but man and young, and have so madly loved and been so tortured. Now I may look into her eyes and do no wrong, but only great Love's bidding. My blood beats in my veins--my heart leaps up so and will not be still."

'Twas deep autumn and a day of gold--the sunset burned and flamed and piled the sky with golden mountains such as had heaped upon each other

on the evening he had stood with his mother at the Long Gallery window before their last parting; the trees' branches were orange and amber and russet brown, the moors had gold hues on them, and on the terraces the late flowers blooming blazed crimson and yellow as if the summer had burned all paler and less sumptuous colour away. The gables and turrets of the tower rose clear soft grey, or dark with ivy, against a sky of deepest blue, the broad tree-studded acres of the park rolled yellowing green to Camylott village, where white cottages nestled among orchards and fields of corn and were enfolded by wooded hills and rising moorland. Occasional farm-yard sounds were to be heard mingled now and then with voices and laughter of children, rooks cawed in the high tree-tops with a lazy irregularity, and there was an autumn freshness in the ambient air. In the courtyard the fountain played with a soft plashing, and as he rode in some little birds were chirping and fluttering as they drank and flirted the water with their wings. The wide doors were thrown open, showing the beauteous huge hall with its pictures and warm colours, its armour and trophies of the chase; the servants stood waiting to receive him, and as the groom took his horse, Mr. Fox approached to greet him on the threshold. Every face had kindly welcome in it, every object seemed to recall some memory which belonged to his happiest youth--to those years when all had been so warm and fair.

"Yes," he said later, as he stood at the window in the Long Gallery and looked forth. "God grant I have come home."

What hours, what days and nights he spent in the weeks that followed. In truth they were too full of intense feeling to be wholly happy. Many a night he woke trembling from dreams of anguish. There were three dreams which came again and again--one was of the morning when she galloped past him in the narrow lane with the strange look in her eyes, and he never dreamed it without a nightmare sense of mad despair and loss from which his own wild cry to her would wake him; another was of the night she passed him on the stair, and did not see him. Oh, God (for 'twas in this wise the dream always came), she did not see him. She passed him by again. And there was left only the rose lying at his feet. And he should never see her face again! And one was of the night he spent in his room alone at Dunstan's Wolde--the night when he had torn the laces from his throat that he might breathe, and had known himself a frenzied man--while her happy bridegroom to be had slept and dreamed of her.

From such dreams he would waken with an unreasoning terror--a nightmare in itself--a sense that even now, even when both were free and he had seen that in her eyes his soul sought for and cried out to--even now some Fate might come between and tear them apart, that their hearts should never beat against each other--never! And, in truth, cold sweat would break forth on his body and he would spring from his bed and pace to and fro, lighting the tapers that he might drive the darkness from him.

"Naught shall come between!" he would cry. "Naught under God's

Heaven--naught on Gods' earth! No man, nor fate, nor devil!"

For he had borne his burden too long, and even for his strength and endurance its heaviness had been too great.

In these weeks of solitude at Camylott he thought much of him who had passed from earth, of the years they had been friends, of the days they had ridden through the green lanes together or walked in the Long Gallery, he himself but a child, the other his mature and affectionate companion. He had loved and been beloved, and now he was gone, leaving behind him no memory which was not tender and full of affectionate reverence.

"Never," was Osmonde's thought, "in all the years we knew each other did I hear him utter a thought which was ungenerous or unjust. You, my lord," he found himself saying aloud one day, "have sure left earth's regrets behind and see with clearer eyes than ours. A man--loving as you yourself loved, yearning as you yourself yearned--you will but pity with a tender soul."

And he could but remember his last interview with Mistress Anne on his bidding farewell to Dunstan's Wolde after the funeral obsequies.

"'Tis a farewell I bid the place," he had said, "though I may see it again. I came here as a boy, and in the first years of my young manhood, and he was always here to bid me welcome. One of my earliest

memories"--they stood in the large saloon together, and he raised his eyes to a picture near them--"one of my first recollections here is of this young face with its blushing cheeks, and of my lord's sorrowful tenderness as he told me that she had died and that his little son--who, had he lived, might have been as myself--had died with her."

Whereupon Mistress Anne, with innocent tears and lowered voice, told him a story of how the night before her lord had been laid to rest, his widow had sat by his side through the slow hours, and had stroked his cold hands and spoken softly to him as if he could feel her lovingness, and on the morning before he left her, she had folded in his clasp a miniature of his young dead wife and a lock of her soft hair and her child's.

"And 'twas, indeed, a tender, strange thing to see and hear," said Anne, "for she said with such noble gentleness, that 'twas the first sweet lady who had been his wife--not herself--and that when she and her child should run to meet him in heaven he would forget that they had ever parted--and all would be well. Think you it will be so, your Grace?" her simple, filled eyes lifted to him appealingly.

"There is no marrying or giving in marriage, 'tis said," answered his Grace, "and she whom he loved first--in his youth--surely----"

Mistress Anne's eyes dwelt upon him in quiet wondering.

"'Tis strange how your Grace and her ladyship sometimes utter the same thoughts, as if you were but one mind," she said. "'No marrying or giving in marriage,' 'twas that she herself said."

Dunstan's Wolde passed into the hands of the next heir, and the countess and her sister went to their father's estate of Wildairs in Gloucestershire, where, during the mourning, they lived in deep seclusion. 'Twas a long mourning, to the wonder of the neighbourhood, who, being accustomed to look upon this young lady as likely to furnish them forth with excitement, had begun at once to make plans for her future and decide what she would do next. Having been rid of her old husband and left an earl's widow with a fine fortune, a town house, and some of the most magnificent jewels in England, 'twas not likely she would long bury herself in an old country house, hiding her beauty in weeds and sad-coloured draperies. She would make her period of seclusion as brief as decency would permit, and after it reappear in a blaze of brilliancy.

But she remained at Wildairs with her sister, Mistress Anne, only being seen on occasions at church, in her long and heavy draperies of black.

"But she is a strange mixture," said my Lord Twemlow's Chaplain, in speaking of her, "and though she hath so changed, hath scarce changed at all. Her black eye can flame as bright as ever under her long widow's veil. She visits the poor with her sister, and gives charities, but she will have no beggarly tricks, and can pick out a hypocrite at

his first whining, howsoever clever he may be. One came to her last week with a lying tale of having loved the old Earl Dunstanwolde, and been his pensioner for years. And to see her mark the weak points of his story, and to hear the wit with which she questioned him until he broke down affrighted, was a thing to marvel at.

"Think you,' she said, 'that I will let knaves trade on my lord's goodness, and play tricks in his name? You shall all see. In the stocks you shall sit and repent it--a warning to other rascals."

But in the miserable, long-neglected village of Wildairs she did such deeds as made her remembered to the end of many lives. No village was in worse case than this had been for years, as might well be expected. Falling walls, rotting thatches, dirt and wretchedness were to be seen on all sides; cottages were broken-paned and noisome, men and women who should have been hale were drawn with rheumatism from mouldering dampness, or sodden with drink and idleness; children who should have been rosy and clean and studying their horn books, at the dame school, were little, dirty, evil, brutal things.

"And no blame of theirs, but yours," said my lady to her father.

"Thou didst not complain in days gone by, Clo," said Sir Jeffery, "but swore at them roundly when they ran in thy horse's way as thou went at gallop through the village, and called the men and women lousy pigs who should be whipt."

"Did I?" said her ladyship, looking at him with large eyes. "Ay, that I did. In those days surely I was mad and blind."

"Wildairs village is no credit to its owner," grumbled Sir Jeoffry.

"Wherefore should it be? I am a poor man--I can do naught for it."

"I can," said my Lady Dunstanwolde.

And so she did, but at first when she entered the tumbledown cottages, looking so tall, a black figure in her sweeping draperies and widow's veil, the people were more than half affrighted. But soon she won them from their terror with her own strange power, and they found that she was no longer the wild young lady who had dashed through their hamlet in hunting garb, her dogs following her, and the glance of her black eyes and the sound of her mocking laugh things to flee before. Her eyes had grown kind, and she had a way none could resist, and showed a singular knowledge of poor folks' wants and likings. Her goodness to them was not that of the ordinary lady who felt that flannel petticoats and soup and scriptural readings made up the sum of all requirements. There were other things she knew and talked to them of, as if they were human creatures like herself.

"I can carry to them food and raiment," said Mistress Anne, wondering at her, "but when I try to talk with them I am afraid and have no words. But you, sister--when you sate by that poor distraught young

woman yesterday and talked to her of her husband who had met such sudden death--you knew what to say, and in the midst of her agony she turned in her bed and lay and stared at you and listened."

"Yes, I knew," said my lady--her eyes shining. "She is passing through what I might pass through if----! Those two poor souls--rustics, and ignorant, who to greater people seem like cattle--they were man and woman who had loved and mated. They could not have told their joy or the meaning of it. I could--I could! And now her mate is gone--and the world is empty, and she is driven mad. I know, I know! Only another woman who knew could have uttered words she would have listened to."

"What--what did you say?" said Mistress Anne--and almost gasped, for my lady looked so full of tragic truth and passion, and how could she know? being only the widow of an old man whom she had but loved with kindness, as if she had been his daughter? 'Twas not through her loss of my Lord Dunstanwolde she knew. And yet, know she did, 'twas plain.

And her answer was the strangest, daring proof.

"I said to her--almost fiercely, though I spoke beneath my breath, 'He hath not left thee: Thou wouldst not have left him. Thou couldst not. Remember! Think! Thou canst not see him, but thee he sees, and loves--loves, I tell thee, as he did two weeks since. Perhaps he holds thee in his arms and cries to thee to hear him. Perhaps 'tis he who speaks in these words of mine. When we have loved them and they us,

death is not strong enough to part us. Love holds too close. Listen?

He is here!"

"Heaven's mercy!" cried gentle Mistress Anne, the tears running down her cheeks. "There seems no Death, when you talk thus, sister--no Death."

"There is none," said my lady, "when Love comes. When Love has come, there is naught else in Nature's universe, for it is stronger than all."

And 'twas as if she were some prophetess who spoke, her face and eyes glowed with such fire and solemnness. But Mistress Anne, gazing at her, thrilled to her heart's core, had a strange sense of fear, wondering whence this mood had come, how it had grown, and what it might bring forth in the unknown future.

The custom of the time held that a widowed lady should mourn retired a year, but 'twas near two before her ladyship of Dunstanwolde came forth from her seclusion, and casting her weeds returned to town. And my Lord Duke of Osmonde had come again to Camylott when the news was spread.

He had been engaged in grave business, and having been abroad upon it had, on his return, travelled at once to the country. To Camylott he came because it was his refuge in all unrestful hours or deeply grave ones--the broad, heavenly scene spread out before it soothed him when

he gazed through its windows, the waving and rustle of the many huge trees on every side never ceased to bring back to him something of the feeling he had had in his childhood, that they were mighty and mysterious friends who hushed him as a child is hushed to sleep; and so he came to Camylott for a few days' repose before re-entering Court life with its tumults and broils and scheming.

In a certain comfortable suite of rooms which had once been a part of the nurseries there lived at peaceful ease an aged woman who loved his Grace well and faithfully, and had so loved him from his childhood, knowing indeed more of the intimate details of his life and career than he himself imagined. This old gentlewoman was Mistress Rebecca Halsell, the whilom chieftainess of the nursery department, and having failed in health as age drew near her, she had been generously installed a quiet pensioner in her old domain. When the Marquess of Roxholm had returned from his first campaign he had found her living in these apartments--a woman nearing seventy, somewhat bent with rheumatism, and white-haired, but with the grave, clear eyes he remembered, still undimmed.

"I hope to be here still, my lord Marquess," she had said, "when you bring your lady home to us--even perhaps when the nurseries are thrown open again. I have been a happy woman in these rooms since the first hour I entered them and took your lordship from Nurse Alison's arms."

She had led a happy life, being surrounded by every comfort, all the

servants being her friends, and she spending her days with books and simple work, sitting chiefly at the large window from whence she could see the park, and the avenue where the company came and went, and on days when there was naught else stirring, watch the rookery with its colony of rooks flying to and fro quarrelling or sitting in judgment on affairs of state, settling their big nests, and marrying and giving in marriage.

When his Grace was at the tower he paid her often a friendly visit, and entertained her bravely with stories of camp and Court until, indeed, she had become a wondrous stateswoman, and knew quite well the merits of Marlborough and Prince Eugene, and had her own views of the changing favourites and their bitter struggles to attain their ends. On this occasion of his return, my lord Duke going to give her greeting, found her parting with a friend, a comely country woman who left them courtesying, and Mistress Halsell sate in her armchair with somewhat of a glow in her grave eyes. And after their first exchange of words the room was for a few moments very quiet.

"Your Grace," she said, "before she, who has just left us, came, I sate here and thought of a day many a year ago when you and I sate together, and your Grace climbed on my knee."

"I have climbed there many a time, Nurse Halsell," he said, his brown eye opening, laughing, as it had a trick of doing.

"But this time was a grave one," Mistress Halsell answered. "We talked of grave things, and in my humble way I strove to play Chaplain and preach a sermon. You had heard Grace and Alison gossip of King Charles and Madam Carwell and Nell Gwynne--and would ask questions it was hard to answer."

"I remember well," said my lord Duke, the light of memory in his eye, and he added, as one who reflects, "He is the King--he is the King!"

"You remember!" said Nurse Halsell, her old eyes glowing. "I have never forgot, and your Grace's little face so lost in thought, as you looked out at the sky."

"I have remembered it," said his Grace, "in many a hard hour such as comes in all men's lives."

"You have known some such?" said the old woman, and of a sudden, as she gazed at him, it seemed as if such feeling overswept her as made her forget he was a great Duke and remember only her beautiful nursing.

"Yes, you have known them, for I have sat here at the window and watched, and there have been days when my heart was like to break."

He started and turned towards her. Her deep eyes were full of tears which brimmed over and ran down her furrowed cheeks, and in them he saw

a tender and wise knowledge of his nature's self and all its pains--a

thing of which, before, he had never dreamed, for how could he have imagined that an old woman living alone could have so followed him with her heart that she had guessed his deepest secret; but this indeed she had, and her next words most touchingly revealed it.

"Being widowed and childless when I came to you," she said, her emotion rising to a passion, "'twas as if you grew to be my own--and in those summer days three years gone, life and love were strong in you--life and love and youth. And her eyes dared not turn to you, nor yours to her--and I am a woman and was afraid--for my man who died and left me widowed was my lover as well as my husband, and soul and body we had been one--so I knew! But as I sate here and saw you as you passed below with your company, I said it to myself again and again, 'He is the King--he is the King!'" And as his Grace rose from his seat, not angered, indeed, gazing at her tenderly, though growing pale, she seized his hand and kissed it, her tears falling.

"If 'tis unseemly," she said, "forgive me, your Grace, forgive me; but I had sate here so long this very morning, and thought but of this thing--and in the midst of my thinking came this woman, and she is from Gloucestershire, and told me of her ladyship of Dunstanwolde--whose chariot passed her on the road, and she goes up to town, and rode radiant and blooming in rich colours, having cast her weeds aside and looking, so the woman said, like a beauteous creature new born, with all of life to come."