CHAPTER XXIX

At the Cow at Wichben

The happiness he had dreamed of was given to him; nay, he knew joy and tenderness even more high and sweet than his fancy had painted. As Camylott had been in his childhood so he saw it again--the most beauteous home in England and the happiest, its mistress the fairest woman and the most nobly loving. As his own father and mother had found life a joyful thing and their world full of warm hearts and faithful friends, so he and she he loved, found it together. The great house was filled once more with guests and pleasures as in the olden time, the stately apartments were thrown open for entertainment, gay cavalcades came and went from town, the forests were hunted, the moors shot over by sportsmen, and the lady who was hostess and chatelaine won renown as well as hearts, since each party of guests she entertained went back to the homes they came from, proclaiming to all her wit and gracious charm.

She rode to hunt and leapt hedges as she had done when she had been Clo Wildairs; she walked the moors with the sportsmen, her gun over her shoulder, she sparkling and showing her white teeth like a laughing gipsy; and when she so walked, the black rings of her hair blown loose about her brow, her cheeks kissed fresh crimson by the wet wind, and turned her eyes upon my lord Duke near her and their looks met, the man

who beheld saw lovers who set his own heart beating.

"But is it true," asked once the great French lady who had related the history of the breaking of the horse, Devil, "is it true that a poor man killed himself in despair on her last marriage, and that she lives a secret life of penance to atone--and wears a hair shirt, and peas in her beautiful satin shoes, and does deeds of mercy in the dark places of the big black English city?"

"A man, mad with jealous rage of her, disappeared from sight," said an English lady present. "And he might well have drowned himself from disappointment that she would not wed him and pay his debts; but 'twas more like he fled England to escape his creditors. And 'tis true she does many noble deeds in secret; but if they be done in penance for Sir John Oxon, she is a lady with a conscience that is tender indeed."

That her conscience was a strangely tender thing was a thought which moved one man's heart strongly many a time. Scarce a day passed in which her husband did not mark some evidence of this--hear some word spoken, see some deed done, almost, it seemed, as if in atonement for imagined faults hid in her heart. He did not remark this because he was unused to womanly mercifulness; his own mother's life had been full of gentle kindness to all about her, of acts of charity and goodness, but in the good deeds of this woman, whom he so loved, he observed an eagerness which was almost a passion. She had changed no whit in the brilliance of her spirit; in the world she reigned a queen as she had

ever done; wheresoever she moved, life and gayety seemed to follow, whether it was at the Court, in the town, or the country; but in both town and country he found she did strange charities, and seemed to search for creatures she might aid in such places as other women had not courage to dive into.

This he discovered through encountering her one day as she re-entered Osmonde House, returning from some such errand, clad in dark, plain garments, her black hood drawn over her face, being thereby so disguised that but for her height and bearing he should not have recognised her--indeed, he thought, she had not seen and would have passed him in silence.

He put forth his hand and stayed her, smiling.

"Your Grace!" he said, "or some vision!"

She threw the black hood back and her fair face and large black eyes shone out from beneath its shadows. She drew his hand up and kissed it, and held it against her cheek in a dear way which was among the sweetest of her wifely caresses.

"It is like Heaven, Gerald," she said, "to see your face, after beholding such miseries."

And when he took her in his arm and led her to the room in which they

loved best to sit in converse together, she told him of a poor creature she had been to visit, and when she named the place where she had found her, 'twas a haunt so dark and wicked that he started in alarm and wonder at her.

"Nay, dear one," he said, "such dens are not for you to visit. You must not go to them again."

She was sitting on a low seat before him, and she leaned forward, the black hood falling back, framing her face and making it look white.

"None else dare go," she said; "none else dare go, Gerald. Such places are so hideous and so noisome, and yet there are those who are born and die there, bound hand and foot when they are born, that they may be bound hand and foot to die!" She rose as if she did not know she moved, and stood up before him, her hand upon her breast.

"'Tis such as I should go," she said, "I who am happy and beloved--after all--after all! 'Tis such as I who should go, and carry love and pity--love and pity!" And she seemed Love's self and Pity's self, and stood transfigured.

"You are a saint," he cried; "and yet I am afraid. Ah! how could any harm you?"

"I am so great and strong," she said, in a still voice, "none could

harm me if they would. I am not as other women. And I do not know fear. See!" and she held out her arm. "I am a Wildairs--built of iron and steel. If in a struggle I held aught in my hand and struck at a man--" her arm fell at her side suddenly as if some horrid thought had swept across her soul, like a blighting blast. She turned white and sank upon her low seat, covering her face with her hands. Then she looked up with awed eyes. "If one who was so strong," she said, "should strike at a man in anger, he might strike him dead--unknowing--dead!"

"'Tis not a thing to think of," said his Grace, and shuddered a little.

"But he would think of it," she said, "all his life through and bear it on his soul." And she shuddered, too, and in her eyes was the old look which sometimes haunted them. Surely, he thought, Nature had never before made a woman's eyes so to answer to her lover's and her lord's. They were so warm and full of all a man's soul most craved for. He had seen them flash fire like Juno's, he had seen tears well up into them as if she had been a tender girl, he had seen them laugh like a child's, he had seen them brood over him as a young dove's might brood over her mate, but this look was unlike any other, and was as if she thought on some dark thing in another world--so far away that her mind's vision could scarce reach it, and yet could not refrain from turning towards its shadow.

But this was but a cloud which his love-words and nearness could dispel. This she herself told him on a time when he spoke to her of it.

"When you see it," she said, "come and tell me that you love me, and that there is naught can come between our souls. As you said the day you showed me the dear rose, 'Naught can come between'--and love is more than all."

"But that you know," he answered.

Life is so full of joys for those who love and, being mated, are given by their good fortunes the power to live as their hearts lead them. These two were given all things, it seemed to the world which looked on. From one of their estates to the other they went with the changing seasons, and with them carried happiness and peace. Her Grace, of whom the villagers had heard such tales as made them feel that they should tremble before the proud glance of her dark eyes, found that their last Duchess, whose eyes had been like violets, could smile no more sweetly. This one was somehow the more majestic lady of the two, being taller and having a higher bearing by Nature, but none among them had ever beheld one who was more a woman and seemed so well to understand a woman's heart and ways. Where had she learned it, they wondered among themselves, as others had wondered the year when, as my Lady Dunstanwolde, she had been guest at Camylott, and in the gipsy's encampment had carried, so soft and tenderly, the little gipsy child in her arms. Where had she learned it?

"Gerald," she said once to her husband, and pressed her hand against

her heart, "'twas always here--here, lying hid, when none knew it--when I did not know it myself. When I seemed but a hard, wild creature, having only men for friends--I was a woman then, and used sometimes to sit and stare at the red coals of the fire, or the red sun going down on the moors, and feel longings and pities and sadness I knew not the meaning of. And often, suddenly, I was made angry by them and would spring up and walk away that I might be troubled no more. But 'twas Nature crying out in me that I was a woman and could be naught else."

Her love and tenderness for her sister, Mistress Anne, increased, it seemed, hour by hour.

"At Camylott, at Marlowell, at Roxholm, at Paulyn, and at Mertoun," she had said when she was married, "we must have an apartment which is Anne's. She is my saint and I must keep a niche for her in every house and set her in it to be worshipped."

And so it was, to whichsoever of their homes they went, Mistress Anne went with them and found always her own nest warm to receive her.

"It makes me feel audacious, sister," she used to say at first, "to go from one grand house to the other and be led to Mistress Anne's apartments, in each, and they always prepared and waiting as if 'twere I who were a Duchess."

"You are Anne! You are Anne!" said her Grace, and kissed her fondly.

Sometimes she was like a gay and laughing girl, and set all the place alight with her witcheries; she invented entertainments for their guests, games and revels for the villagers, and was the spirit of all. In one of their retrospective hours, Osmonde had told her of the thoughts he had dreamed on, as they had ridden homeward from the encampment of the gipsies--of his fancies of the comrade she would make for a man who lived a roving life. She had both laughed and wept over the story, clinging to his breast as she had told her own, and of her fear of his mere glance at her in those dark days, and that she had not dared to sit alone but kept near her lord's side lest she should ponder and remember what 'twas honest she should forget.

But afterwards she planned, for their fanciful pleasure, rambling long jaunts when they rode or walked unattended, and romanced like children, eating their simple food under broad greenwood trees or on the wide moors with a whole world of heather, as it seemed, rolled out before them.

On such a journey, setting out from London one bright morning, they rode through Essex and stopped by chance at a little village inn. 'Twas the village of Wickben, and on the signboard which hung swinging on a post before the small thatched house of entertainment was painted a brown cow.

None knew 'twas a Duke and his Duchess who dismounted and entered the place. They had made sure that by their attire none could suspect them of being more than ordinary travellers, modest enough to patronise a humble place.

"But Lord, what a fine pair!" said the old fellow who was the landlord. "Adam and Eve may have been such when God first made man and woman, and had stuff in plenty to build them."

He was an aged man and talkative, and being eager for a chance to wag his tongue and hear travellers' adventures, attended them closely. He gave them their simple repast himself in small room, and as he moved to and fro fell to gossiping, emboldened by their friendly gayety of speech and by her Grace's smiling eyes.

"Your ladyship," he began at first, in somewhat awkward, involuntary homage.

"Nay, gaffer, I am no ladyship," she answered, with Clo Wildairs's unceremonious air. "I am but a gipsy woman in good luck for a day, and my man is a gipsy, too, though his skin is fairer than mine. We are going to join our camp near Camylott village. These horses are not ours but borrowed--honestly. Is't not so, John Merton?" And she so laughed at his Grace with her big, saucy eyes, that he wished he had been indeed a gipsy man and could have kissed her openly.

"Art the Gipsies' queen?" asked the old man, bewitched by her.

"Not she," answered his Grace, "but a plain gipsy wench who makes baskets and tells fortunes--for all her good looks. Thou'rt flattering her, old fellow. All the men flatter her."

"'Tis well there are some to flatter me," said her Grace, showing her white teeth. "Thou dost not. But 'tis always so when a poor woman weds a man and tramps by the side of him instead of keeping him at her feet."

And then they led their old host on to talk, and told him stories of what gipsies did, and of their living in tents and sleeping in the open, and of the ill-luck which sometimes befel them when the lord of the manor they camped on was a hard man and evil tempered.

"'Tis a Duke who rules over Camylott, is't not?" the old fellow asked.

"Ay," was her Grace's answer, nodding her head. "He is well enough, but his lady--Lord! but they tell that she was a vixen before her marriage a few years gone!"

"I have seen her," said his Grace. "She is not ill to look at, and has done us no harm yet."

"Ay, but she may," says her Grace, nodding wisely again. "Who knows what such a woman may turn out. I have seen him!" She stopped, her elbows on the little round wooden table, her chin on her hands, and gave her saucy stare again. "I'll pay thee a compliment," she said. "He is a big fellow, and not unlike thee--though he be Duke and thou naught but a vagabond gipsy."

Their host had hearkened to them eagerly, and now he put in a question. "Was not she the beauty that was married to an old Earl who left her widow?" he said. "Was not she Countess Dunstanwolde?"

"Ay," answered her Grace, quietly.

"Ecod!" cried the old fellow, "that minds me of a story, and 'twas a thing happened in this very house and room. Look there!"

He pointed with something like excitement to the window. 'Twas but seldom he had chance to tell his story, and 'twas a thing he dearly loved to do, life being but a dull thing at the Cow at Wickben, and few travellers passing that way. A pair so friendly and gay and ready to hearken to his chatter as these two he had not seen for years.

"Look there!" he said. "At that big hole in the wall."

They turned together and looked at it in some wonder that her ladyship of Dunstanwolde should have any connection with it. 'Twas indeed a big

hole, and looked as if the plaster of the wall under the sill had been roughly broken and hacked.

"Ay," said the host, "'tis a queer thing and came here in a strange way, being made by a gentleman's sword, and he either wild with liquor or with rage. Never shall I forget hearing his horse's hoofs come tearing over the road, as if some man was riding for his life. I was abed, and started out of my sleep at the sound of it. 'Who's chased by the devil at this time o' night through Wickben village?' says I, and scarce were the words out of my mouth before the horse clatters up to the house and stops. I could hear him panting and heaving as his rider gets off and strides up to bang on the door. 'What dost thou want?' says I, putting my head out of the window. 'Come down and let me in,' answers he; 'I have no time to spare. You have a thing in your house I would find.' 'Twas a gentleman's voice, and I saw 'twas a gentleman's dress he wore, for 'twas fine cloth, and his sword had a silvered scabbard, and his hat rich plumes. 'Come down,' says he, and bangs the door again, so down I went."

"Who was he?" asked her Grace slowly, for he had stopped for breath. She sat quite still as before, her round chin held in her hands, her eyes fixed on him, but there was no longer any laughter in their blackness. "Did he tell his name?"

"Not then," was the answer; "nor did he know I heard when he spoke it, breaking forth in anger. But that is to come later"--with the air of

one who would have his tale heard to the most dramatic advantage. "Into this room he strides and to the window straight and looks below the sill. 'Four years ago,' says he, 'there was a hole here in the wall. Was't so or was't not?' and he looks at me sharp and fierce as if he would take me by the throat if I said there had been none. 'Ay, there was a hole there long enough,' I answers him, 'but 'twas mended with new plaster at last. Your lordship can see the patch, for 'twas but roughly done.' Then he goes close to it and stares. 'Ay,' says he, 'there has been a hole mended. Old Chris did not lie.' And on that he turns to me. 'Get out of the room,' he says, 'I have a search to make here. Your wall will want another patch when I am done,' he says. 'But 'twill be made good. Go thy ways.' And he draws out his hanger, and there was sweat on his brow and he breathed fast, as if he was wild with his anxiousness to find what he sought."

"And didst leave him?" asked her Grace, as quiet as before. "For how long?"

The old man grinned.

"Not for long," said he, "nor did I go far. I stood outside, where I could see through the crack o' the door."

The Duchess nodded with an unmoved face.

"He was like a man in a frenzy," the host went on. "He dug at the

plaster till I thought his sword would break; he dug as if he were paid for it by the minute. He made a hole bigger than had been there before, and when 'twas made he thrusts his hand in and fumbles about, cursing under his breath. And of a sudden he gives a start and stops and pants for breath, and then draws his hand back, and it was bloody, being scratched by the stone and plaster, but he held somewhat in it, a little dusty package, and he clutches it to his breast and laughs outright. Good Lord, 'twas like a devil's laugh, 'twas so wild and joyful. 'Ha, ha!' cries he, shaking the thing in the air and stamping his foot, 'Jack Oxon comes to his own again, to his own!'"

"Then," says her Grace, more slowly still, "that was his name? I have heard it before."

"I heard it again," said the old story-teller, eager to reach his climax. "And 'tis that ends the story so finely. 'Twas by chance talk of travellers I heard it nigh six months later. The very day after he stood here and searched for his package he disappeared from sight and has not been heard of since. And the last who set eyes on him was my Lady Dunstanwolde, who is now a Duchess at Camylott, where your camp is. 'Twas her name brought the story back to me."

Her Grace rose, catching her breath with a laugh. She turned her face towards the window, as if, of a sudden, attracted by somewhat to be seen outside.

"'Tis a good story," she said, but for a moment the crimson roses on her cheeks had shuddered to whiteness. Why, no man could tell. Her host did not see her countenance--perhaps my lord Duke did not.

"'Tis a good story!" she laughed again.

"And well told," added my lord Duke.

Her Grace turned to them both once more. Through some wondrous exercise of her will she looked herself again.

"As we are in luck to-day," she said, "and it has passed the time, let us count it in the reckoning."

A new, almost wild, fantastic gayety seized her. She flung herself into her playing of the part of a gipsy woman with a spirit which was a marvel to behold. She searched his Grace's pockets and her own for pence, and counted up the reckoning on the table, saying that they could but afford this or that much, that they must save this coin for a meal, that for a bed, this to pay toll on the road. She used such phrases of the gipsy jargon as she had picked up, and made jokes and bantering speeches which set their host cackling with laughter. Osmonde had seen her play a fantastic part before on their whimsical holidays, but never one which suited her so well, and in which she seemed so full of fire and daring wit. She was no Duchess, a man might have sworn, but a tall, splendid, black-eyed laughing gipsy woman, who, to the man who

was her partner, would be a fortune every day, and a fortune not of luck alone, but of gay spirit and bravery and light-hearted love.

That night the moon shone white and clear, and in the mid hours my lord Duke waked from his sleep suddenly, and saw the brightness streaming full through the oriel window, and in the fair flood of it his love's white figure kneeling.

"Gerald," she cried, clinging to him when he went to her. "'Twas I awaked you. I called, though I did not speak."

"I heard, as I should hear if I lay dead," he answered low.

Her hair was all unbound for the night--her black, wondrous hair which he so loved--and from its billowy cloud her face looked at him wild and white, her mouth quivering.

"Gerald," she said, "look out with me."

Together they looked forth from the wide window into the beauty of the night, up into the great vault of Heaven, where the large silver moon sailed in the blue, the stars shining faintly before her soft brilliance.

"We are Pagans," she said, "poor Pagans who oftenest seem to pray to a

cruel thing we do not know but only crouch before in terror, lest it crush us. But when we look up into such a Heaven as this, its majesty and stillness seem a presence, and we dare to utter what our hearts cry out, and know we shall be heard." She caught his hand and held it to her heart, which he felt leap beneath it. "There is no power would harm a woman's child," she cried--"a little unborn thing which has not breathed--because it would wreak vengeance on herself! There is none, Gerald, is there?" And she clung to him, her uplifted face filled with such lovely, passionate, woman's fear and pleading as made him sweep her to his breast and hold her silently--because he could not speak.

"For I have learned to be afraid," she murmured brokenly, against his breast. "And I was kneeling here to pray--to pray with all my soul--that if there were so cruel a thing 'twould kill me now--blight me--take me from you--that I might die in torture--but not bring suffering on my love, and on an innocent thing."

And her heart beat like some terrified caged eaglet against his own, and her eyes were wild with woe. But the wondrous stillness of the deep night enfolded them, as if Nature held them in her great arms which comfort so. And her stars gazed calmly down, even as though their calmness were answering speech.