

## CHAPTER XXX

### On Tyburn Hill

There was none knew her as her husband did--none in the world--though so many were her friends and worshippers. As he loved her he knew her, the passion of his noble heart giving him clearer and more watchful eyes than any other. Truth was, indeed, that she herself did not know how much he saw and pondered on and how tender his watch upon her was.

The dark shadow in her eyes he had first noted, the look which would pass over her face sometimes at a moment when 'twas brightest, when it glowed with tenderest love for himself or with deepest yearning over the children who were given to them as time passed, for there were born to fill their home four sons who were like young gods for strength and beauty, and two daughters as fair things as Nature ever made to promise perfect womanhood.

And how she loved and tended them, and how they joyed in their young lives and worshipped and revered her!

"When I was a child, Gerald," she said to their father, "I was unhappy--and 'tis a hideous thing that a child should be so. I loved none and none loved me, and though all feared my rage and gave me my

will, I was restless and savage and a rebel, though I knew not why. There were hours--I did not know their meaning, and hated them--when I was seized with fits of horrid loneliness and would hide myself in the woods, and roll in the dead leaves, and curse myself and all things because I was wretched. I used to think that I was angered at my dogs, or my horse, or some servant, or my father, and would pour forth oaths at them--but 'twas not they. Our children must be happy--they must be happy, Gerald. I will have them happy!"

What a mother they had in her!--a creature who could be wild with play and laughter with them, who was so beautiful that even in mere babyhood they would sit upon her knee and stare at her for sheer infant pleasure in her rich bloom and great, sweet eyes; who could lift and toss and rock them in her strong, soft arms as if they were but flowers and she a summer wind; whose voice was music, and whose black hair was a great soft mantle 'twas their childish delight to coax her to loosen that it might flow about her, billowing, she standing laughing beneath and tossing it over them to hide their smallness under it as beneath a veil. She was their heroine and their young pride, and among themselves they made joyful little boasts that there was no other such lady in all England. To behold her mount her tall horse and gallop and leap hedges and gates, to hear her tell stories of the moorlands and woods, and the game hiding in nests and warrens, of the ways of dogs and hawks and horses, and soldiers and Kings and Queens, and of how their father had fought in battles, and of how big the world was and how full of wonders and of joys! What other children had such pleasures in their

lives?

But a few months after their Graces' visit to the Cow at Wickben, young John, who was heir and Marquess of Roxholm, had been born; following each other his two brothers, and later the child Daphne and her sister Anne; last, the little Lord Cuthbert, who was told as he grew older that he was to be the hero of his house in memory of Cuthbert de Mertoun, who had lived centuries ago; and in the five villages 'twas sworn that each son her Grace bore her husband was a finer creature than the last, and that her girl children outbloomed their brothers all.

Among these young human flowers Mistress Anne reigned gentle queen and saint, but softly faded day by day, having been a fragile creature all her life, but growing more so as time passed, despite the peace she lived in and the happiness surrounding her.

In her eyes, too, his Grace had seen a look which held its mystery. They were such soft eyes and so kind and timid he had always loved them. In days gone by he had often observed them as they followed her sister, and had been touched by the faithful tenderness of their look; but after her marriage they seemed to follow her more tenderly still, and sometimes with a vague, piteous wonder, as if the fond creature asked herself in secret a question she knew not how to answer. More and more devout she had grown, and, above all things, craved to aid her Grace in the doing of her good deeds. To such work she gave herself

with the devotion of one who would strive to work out a penance.

Her own attendant was one of those whom her sister had aided, and was a young creature with a piteous little story indeed--a pretty, rosy, country child of but seventeen when, after her Grace's marriage, she came to Camylott to serve Mistress Anne.

On her first coming my lord Duke had marked her and the sadness of her innocent, childish face and blue eyes, and had spoken of her to Anne, asking if she had met with some misfortune.

"A pretty, curly-headed creature such as she should be a village beauty and dimpling with smiles," he said, "but the little thing looks sometimes as if she had wept a year. Who has done her a wrong?"

Mistress Anne gave a little start and bent lower over her embroidery frame, but her Grace, who was in the apartment, answered for her.

"'Twas Sir John Oxon," she answered, "who has wronged so many."

"What!" Osmonde cried, "wrought he the poor thing's ruin?"

"No," the Duchess replied; "but would have done it, and she, poor child, all innocent, believing herself an honest wife. He had so planned it, but Fate saved her!"

"A mock marriage," says the Duke, "and she saved from it! How?"

"Because the day she went to him to be married, as he had told her, he was not at his lodgings, and did not return."

"'Twas the very day he disappeared--the day you saw him?" Osmonde exclaimed.

"Yes," was the answer given, as her Grace crossed the room. "And 'twas because I had seen him that the poor thing came to me with her story--and I cared for her."

She, too, had been sitting at her embroidery frame, and had crossed the room for silks, which lay upon the table near to Mistress Anne. As she laid her hand upon them she looked down and uttered a low exclamation, springing to her sister's side.

"Anne, love!" she cried. "Nay, Anne!"

Mistress Anne's small, worn face had dropped so low over her frame that it at last lay upon it, showing white against the silken roses so gaily broidered there. She was in a dead swoon.

Later Osmonde heard further details of this story--of how the poor child, having no refuge in the great city, had dared at last to go to

Dunstanwolde House in the wild hope that her ladyship, who had last seen Sir John, might tell her if he had let drop any word concerning his journey--if he had made one. She had at first hung long about the servants' entrance, watching the workmen who were that day walling in the wing of black cellars my lady had wished to close before she left the place, and at length, in desperation, had appealed to a young stone-mason, with a good-humoured countenance, and he had interceded for her with a lacquey passing by.

"But had I not spoke Sir John's name," the girl said when my lord Duke spoke kindly to her of her story and her Grace's goodness; "had I not spoke his name, the man would not have carried my message. But he said she would see me if I had news of Sir John Oxon. He blundered, your Grace, thinking I came from Sir John himself, and told her Grace 'twas so. And she bade him bring me to her."

Her Grace she worshipped, and would break here into sobs each time she told the story, describing her fright when she had been led to the apartment where sate the great lady, who had spoke to her in a voice like music and with such strange, deep pity of her grief, and in a passion of tenderness had told the truth to her, taking her, after her swoon, in her own strong, lovely arms, as if she had been no rich Countess but a poor woman, such as she who wept, and one whose heart, too, might have been broke by a cruel, deadly blow.

This poor simple child (who was in time cured of her wound and married

an honest fellow who loved her) was not the only one of Sir John Oxon's victims whom her Grace protected. There were, indeed, many of them, and 'twas as though she had made it her curious duty to search them out. When she and her lord lived sumptuously at Osmonde House in town, shining at Court, entertaining Royalty itself at their home, envied and courted by all as the happiest married lovers and the favourites of Fortune, my lord Duke knew that many a day she cast her rich robes and, clad in the dark garments and black hood, went forth to visit strange, squalid places. Since the hour of his first meeting her on her return from such an errand, when they had spoken together, he had never again forbade her to follow the path 'twas plain she had chosen.

"Were I going forth to battle," he had said, "you would not seek to hold me back; and in your battle, for it seems one to me, though I know not what 'tis fought for, I will not restrain you."

"Ay, 'tis a battle," she had said, and seized his hands and kissed them as if in passionate gratitude. "And 'tis a debt--a debt I swore to pay--if that we call God would let me. Perhaps He will not, but were He you--who know my soul--He would."

Yet but a few hours later, when he joined her in the Mall, where she had descended from her coach to walk with the world of fashion and moved among the wits and beaux and leaders of the mode, drawing all round her by the marvel of her spirit and the brilliancy of her gayety and bearing, he hearing her rich laughter and meeting the bright look

of her lovely, flashing eyes, wondered if she was the woman whose voice still lingered in his ears and the memory of whose words would not leave his fervent heart.

Their love was so perfect a thing that they had never denied each other aught. Why should they; indeed, how could they? Each so understood and trusted the other that they scarce had need for words in the deciding of such questions as other pairs must reason gravely over. There was no question, only one thought between them, and in his life a thing which grew each hour as he had long since known it would. 'Twas this woman whom he loved--this one--her looks, her ways, her laughter and her tears, her very faults, if she should have them, her past, her present, and her future which seemed all himself.

That--Duchess of Osmonde though she might be--she was known in dark places and moved among the foul evil there, like the sun which strove at rare hours to cleanse and dispel it; that she had in kennels and noisome dens strange friends, was a thing at first vaguely rumoured because the world had ever loved its stories of her, and been ready to believe any it heard and invent new ones when it had tired of the old. But there came a time when through a strange occurrence the rumour was proved, most singularly, to be a truth.

Two gilt coaches, full of chattering fine ladies and gentlemen, were being driven on a certain day through a part of the town not ordinarily frequented by fashion, but the occupants of the coaches had been

entertaining themselves with a great and curious sight it had been their delicate fancy to desire to behold as an exciting novelty. This had been no less an exhibition than the hanging of two malefactors on Tyburn Hill--the one a handsome young highwayman, the other a poor woman executed for larceny.

The highwayman had been a favourite and had died gaily, and that he should have been cut off in his prime had put the crowd (among which were several of his yet uncaught companions) in an ill-humour; the poor woman had wept and made a poor end, which had added to the anger of the beholders.

'Twas an evil, squalid, malodorous mob, not of the better class of thieves and tatterdemalions, but of the worst, being made up of cutthroats out of luck, pickpockets, and poor wretches who were the scourgings of the town and the refuse of the kennel. 'Twas just the crowd to be roused to some insensate frenzy, being hungry, bitter, and vicious; and when, making ready to slouch back to its dens, its attention was attracted by the gay coaches, with their liveries and high-fed horses, and their burden of silks and velvets, and plumes nodding over laughing, carefree, selfish faces, it fell into a sudden fit of animal rage.

'Twas a woman who began it. (She had been a neighbour of the one who had just met punishment, and in her own hovel at that moment lay hid stolen goods.) She was a wild thing, with a battered face and unkempt

hair; her rags hung about her waving, and she had a bloodshot, fierce eye.

"Look!" she screamed out suddenly, high and shrill; "look at them in their goold coaches riding home from Tyburn, where they've seen their betters swing!"

The ladies in the chariots, pretty, heartless fools, started affrighted in their seats, and strove to draw back; their male companions, who were as pretty, effeminate fools themselves and of as little spirit, started also, and began to look pale about the gills.

"Look at them!" shrieked the virago, "shivering like rabbits. A pretty end they would make if they were called to dance at a rope's end. Look ye at them, with their white faces and their swords and periwigs!"

And she stood still, waving her arms, and poured forth a torrent of curses.

'Twas enough. The woman beside her looked and began to shake her fist, seized by the same frenzy; her neighbour caught up her cry, her neighbour hers; a sodden-faced thief broke into a howling laugh, another followed him, the madness spread from side to side, and in a moment the big foul crowd surged about the coaches, shrieking blasphemies and obscenities, shaking fists, howling cries of "Shame!" and threats of vengeance.

"Turn over the coaches! Drag them out! Tear their finery from them! Stuff their mincing mouths with mud!" rose all about them.

The servants were dragged from their seats and hauled from side to side, their liveries were in ribbands, their terrified faces, ghastly with terror and streaming with blood, might be seen one moment in one place, the next in another, sometimes they seemed down on the ground. The crowd roared with rage and laughter at their cries. One lady swooned with terror, one or two crouched on the floor of the coach; the dandies gesticulated and called for help.

"They will kill us! they will kill us!" screamed the finest beau among them. "The watch! the watch! The constables!"

"'Tis worse than the Mohocks," cried another, but his hand so shook he could not have drawn his sword if he had dared.

The next instant the glass of the first coach was smashed and its door beaten open. A burly fellow seized upon a shrieking beauty and dragged her forth laughing, dealing her gallant a mighty clout on the face as he caught her. Blood spouted from the poor gentleman's delicate aquiline nose, and the mob danced and yelled.

"Drag 'em all out!" was roared by the sodden-faced thief. "The women to the women and the men to the men, and then change about." The creatures

were like wild beasts, and their prey would have been torn to pieces, but at that moment, from a fellow at the edge of the crowd broke a startled oath.

Someone had made way to him and laid a strong hand on his shoulder, and there was that in his cry which made those nearest turn.

A tall figure in black draperies stood towering above him, and in truth above all the rest of the crowd. 'Twas a woman, and she called out to the mad creatures about her in command.

"Fools!" she cried; "have a care. Do you want to swing at a rope's end yourselves?" 'Twas a fierce voice, the voice of a brave creature who feared none of them; though 'twas a rich voice and a woman's, and so rang with authority that it actually checked the tempest for a moment and made the leaders turn to look.

She made her way nearer and threw back her hood from her face.

"I am Clorinda Mertoun, who is Duchess of Osmonde," she cried to them. "There are many of you know me. Call back your senses, and hearken to what I say."

The ladies afterwards in describing the scene used to quake as they tried to paint this moment.

"There was a cry that was like a low howl," they said, "as if beasts were baffled and robbed of their prey. Some of them knew her and some did not, but they all stood and stared. Good Lord! 'twas her great black eyes that held them; but I shall be affrighted when I think of her, till my dying day."

'Twas her big black eyes and the steady flame in them that held the poor frenzied fools, perchance as wolves are said to be held by the eye of man sometimes; but 'twas another thing, and on that she counted. She looked round from one face to the other.

"You know me," she said to one; "and you, and you, and you," nodding at each. "I can pick out a dozen of you who know me, and should find more if I marked you all. How many here are my friends and servants?"

There was a strange hoarse chorus of sounds; they were the voices of women who were poor bedraggled drabs, men who were thieves and cutthroats, a few shrill voices of lads who were pickpockets and ripe for the gallows already.

"Ay, we know thee! Ay, your Grace! Ay!" they cried, some in half-sullen grunts, some as if half-affrighted, but all in the tones of creatures who suddenly began to submit to a thing they wondered at.

Then the woman who had begun the turmoil suddenly fell down on her knees and began to kiss her Grace's garments with hysteric, choking

sobs.

"She said thou wert the only creature had ever spoke her fair," she cried. "She said thou hadst saved her from going distraught when she lay in the gaol. Just before the cart was driven away she cried out sobbing, 'Oh, Lord! Oh, your Grace!' and they thought her praying, but I knew she prayed to thee."

The Duchess put her hand on the woman's greasy, foul shoulder and answered in a strange voice, nodding her head, her black brows knit, her red mouth drawn in.

"'Tis over now!" she said. "'Tis over and she quiet, and perchance ere this she has seen a fair thing. Poor soul! poor soul!"

By this time the attacked party had gained strength to dare to move. The pretty creature who had been first dragged forth from the coach uttered a shriek and fell on her knees, clutching at her rescuer's robe.

"Oh, your Grace! your Grace!" she wept; "have mercy! have mercy!"

"Mercy!" said her Grace, looking down at the tower of powdered hair decked with gewgaws. "Mercy! Sure we all need it. Your ladyship came--for sport--to see a woman hang? I saw her in the gaol last night waiting her doom, which would come with the day's dawning. 'Twas not

sport. Had you been there with us, you would not have come here to-day. Get up, my lady, and return to your coach. Make way, there!" raising her voice. "Let that poor fellow," pointing to the ashen-faced coachman, "mount to his place. Be less disturbed, Sir Charles," to the trembling fop, "my friends will let you go free."

And that they did, strangely enough, though 'twas not willingly, the victims knew, as they huddled into their places, shuddering, and were driven away, the crowd standing glaring after them, a man or so muttering blasphemies, though none made any movement to follow, but loitered about and cast glances at her Grace of Osmonde, who waited till the equipages were well out of sight and danger.

"'Twas wasted rage," she said to those about her. "The poor light fools were not worth ill-usage."

The next day the Duke heard the tale, which had flown abroad over the town. His very soul was thrilled by it and that it told him, and he went to her Grace and poured forth to her a passion of love that was touched with awe.

"I could see you!" he cried, "when they told the story to me. I could see you as you stood there and held the wild beasts at bay. 'Twas that I saw in your child-eyes when you rode past me in the hunting-field; 'twas that fire which held them back, and the great sweet soul of you which has reached them in their dens and made you worshipped of them."

"Twas that they know me," she answered; "'twas that I have stood by their sides in their blackest hours. I have seen their children born. I have helped their old ones and their young through death. Some I have saved from the gallows. Some I have--" she stopped and hung her head as if black memories overpowered her.

He knew what she had left unfinished.

"You have been--to comfort those who lie in Newgate--at their last extremity?" he ended for her.

"Ay," she answered. "The one who will show kindness to them in those awful hours they worship as God's self. There was a poor fellow I once befriended there"--she spoke slowly and her voice shook. "He was condemned--for taking a man's life. The last night--before I left him--he knelt to me and swore--he had meant not murder. He had struck in rage--one who had tortured him with taunts till he went raving. He struck, and the man fell--and he had killed him! And now must hang."

"Good God!" cried my lord Duke. "By chance! In frenzy! Not knowing! And he died for it?"

"Ay," she answered, her great eyes on his and wide with horror, "on Tyburn Tree!"