

## CHAPTER XXXI

Their Graces Keep their Wedding Day at Camylott

"She came to Court at last, my Lord Duke," said his Grace of Marlborough. "She came at last--as I felt sure 'twas Fate she should."

'Twas at Camylott he said this, where he had come in those days which darkened about him when, royal favour lost, the acclamations of a fickle public stilled, its clamour of applause almost forgot and denied by itself, his glory as statesman, commander, warrior seemed to sink beneath the horizon like a sunset in a winter sky. His splendid frame shattered by the stroke of illness, his heart bereaved, his great mind dulled and saddened, there were few friends faithful to him, but my Lord Duke of Osmonde, who had never sought his favour or required his protection, who had often held views differing from his own and hidden none of them, was among the few in whose company he found solace and pleasure.

"I see you as I was," he would say. "Nay, rather as I might have been had Nature given me a thing she gave to you and withheld from John Churchill. You were the finer creature and less disturbed by poor worldly dreams."

So more than once he came to be guest at Camylott, and would be moved

to pleasure by the happiness and fulness of life in the very air of the place, by the joyousness of the tall, handsome children, by the spirit and sweet majesty of the tall beauty their mother, by the loveliness of the country and the cheerful air of well-being among the villagers and tenantry. But most of all he gave thought to the look which dwelt in the eyes of my Lord Duke and the woman who was so surely mate and companion as well as wife to him. When, though 'twas even at the simplest moment, each looked at the other, 'twas a heavenly thing plain to see.

Upon one of their wedding-days he was at Camylott with them. 'Twas but a short time before the quiet death of Mistress Anne, and was the tenth anniversary of their Graces' union.

At Camylott they always spent their anniversary, though upon their other domains the rejoicings which made Camylott happy were also held. These festivities were gay and rustic, including the pealing of church bells, the lighting of bonfires, rural games, and feastings; but they were most noted for a feature her Grace herself had invented before she had yet been twelve months a wife, and 'twas a pretty fancy, too, as well as a kind thought.

She had talked of it first to her husband one summer afternoon as they walked together in the gold glow of sunset through Camylott Woods. 'Twas one of many happy hours shared with her which he remembered to his life's end, and could always call up in his mind the deep amber

light filtering through the trees, the thick green growth of the ferns and the scent of them, the moss under foot and on the huge fallen trunk they at last sate down upon.

"To every man, woman, and child we rule over," she said, "on that day we will give a wedding gift. As the year passes we will discover what each longs for most, and that thing we will give. So on that heavenly day each one shall have his heart's desire--in memory," she added, with soft solemnity.

And he echoed her.

"In memory!" For neither at that time nor at any other did either of them forget those hours they had lived apart and how Fate had seemed to work them ill, and how they had been desolate and hungered.

So on each morning of the wedding-day, while the bells were ringing a peal, the flag flying from the Tower, the park prepared for games and feasting, a crowd of ruddy countenances, clean smocks, petticoats, and red cloaks flocked on the terrace from which the gifts were given.

'Twas from his invalid-chair within the library window that the once great Commander sate and saw this sight; her Grace standing by her husband at a long table, giving each gift with her own hand and saying a few words to each recipient with a bright freedom 'twas worth any man's while to see.

The looker-on remembered the histories he had heard of the handsome hoyden whose male attire had been the Gloucestershire scandal, the Court beauty who in the midst of her triumphs had chosen to play gentle consort to an old husband, the Duchess who shone in the great world like the sun and who yet doffed her brocades and jewels to don serge and canvas and labour in Rag Yard and Slaughter Alley to rescue thieves and beggars and watch the mothers of their hapless children in their throes. Ay, and more yet, to sit in the black condemned-cell at Newgate and hold the hand and pour courage into the soul of a shuddering wretch who in the cold grey of morning would dangle from a gallows tree.

"'Tis a strange nature," he thought, "and has ever been so. It has passed through some strange hours and some dark ones. Yet to behold her----"

There had come to her side a young couple, the woman with a child in her arms courtesying blushing, her youthful husband grinning and pulling his forelock.

Her Grace took the infant and cuddled and kissed it, while its father and mother glowed with delight.

"'Tis a fine boy, Betty," she said. "'Tis bigger than the last one, Tom. His christening finery is in the package here, and I will stand sponsor as before."

"Mother," said young John at her elbow, "may I not stand sponsor, too?"

She laughed and pulled his long love-locks.

"Ay, my lord Marquess," she answered, "if his parents are willing to take such a young one."

Mistress Anne sate by their guest, he holding her in great favour. As the people came for their gifts she told him their names and stories. Through weakness she walked about but little in these days, and the failing soldier liked her company, so she often sate near him in her lounging-chair and with gentle artfulness lured him into reminiscences of his past campaigns. She was very frail to-day, and in her white robe, and with her large eyes which seemed to have outgrown her face, she looked like the wraith of a woman rather than a creature of flesh and blood.

"Those two her Grace rescued," she said, as Betty and Tom Beck retired; "the one from woe, the other from cruel wickedness. He had betrayed the poor child and deserted her, and 'twas her Grace who touched his heart and woke manhood in it, and made them happy man and wife."

Then came an old woman leading a girl and boy, both fair and blooming and with blue eyes and fair curling locks.

"Are they both well and both happy, dame?" the Duchess asked. "Yes, that they are, I see. And I know they are both good."

She took the girl's face in both hands and smiled into it as she might have smiled at a flower, and then kissed her tenderly. She gave her a little new gown and a pretty huswife stocked with implements to make it. She put her hand on the boy's shoulder and looked at him as his mother would have looked had she been tender of him.

"For you, Robin," she said, "there are books. I know 'tis books and learning you long for, and you shall have them. His Grace's Chaplain has promised me to teach you."

The boy clasped the books under his arm, hugging them against his breast, and when her Grace turned to the next newcomer he seized a fold of her robe and kissed it.

"Who are those children?" the Captain-General asked. "They do not look like rustics."

"Those two she rescued also," answered Mistress Anne in a low voice.

"She found them in a thieves' haunt being trained as pickpockets. They are the cast-off offspring of a gentleman who lived an evil life."

"Was she told his name?"

"Yes," Mistress Anne said, lower still; "'twas a gentleman who was--lost. Sir John Oxon."

The mystery of this gentleman's disappearance was a thing forgotten, but Mistress Anne's hearer recalled it, and that the man had left an evil reputation, and that 'twas said that in the first bloom of his youth he had been among the worshippers of the Gloucestershire beauty, and there passed through the old Duke's mind a vague wonder as to whether the Duchess remembered girlish sentiments the hoyden had lived through and forgot.

It seemed the man's name being once drawn from the past was not to be allowed to rest, for later in the day he heard of him again, and curiously indeed.

There came in the afternoon from town a sturdy, loud-voiced country gentleman, with a red, honest face and a good-humoured eye, and he was so received by the family--by his Grace, who shook him warmly by the hand, by the Duchess, who gave him both hers to kiss, and by the young ones, who cried out in rejoicing over him--that their distinguished guest perceived him to be an old friend who was, as it were, an old comrade.

And so it proved, for 'twas soon revealed to him by the gentleman himself (whose name was Sir Christopher Crowell, and whose estate lay on the borders of Warwickshire and Gloucestershire) that he had been

one of the boon companions of her Grace's father, Sir Jeoffry Wildairs, and he had known her from the time she was five years old, and had been first made the comrade and plaything of a band of the worst rioters in three counties.

"Ay!" he cried, exultantly, for he seemed always exultant when he spoke of her Grace, who was plainly his idol. "At seven she would toss off her ale, and sing and swear as wickedly as any man among us, and had great black eyes that flashed fire when we crossed her, and her hair hung below her waist, and she was the most beauteous child-devil and the most lawless, that man or woman ever clapt eyes on. And to behold her now! to behold her now!" And then he motioned towards the little Anne, who was flashing-eyed, and long-limbed, and a brown beauty. "'Tis my Lady Anne who is most like her," he said; "but Lord! she hath been treated fair by Fortune, and loved and cherished, and is a young queen already."

Later, when the night had fallen and was thick with stars, and the festal lights were twinkling like other stars among the trees of the park, and from the happy crowds at play there floated the sounds of laughter and joyful voices, their Graces and their guests sate or walked upon the terrace amid the night-scents of flowers and watched the merriment going on below them and talked together.

"Ay," broke forth old Sir Christopher, "you two happy folk light joyful fires, and make joyful hearts wheresoever you go."



'Twas at this moment two of the other country guests--they being old Gloucestershire comrades also--stayed their sauntering before her Grace to speak to her.

"Eldershawe and me have just been saying," broke forth one of them, chuckling, "how this bringeth back old times, though 'tis little like them. We three were of the birthnight party--Eldershawe, Chris, and me. Thou dost not forget old friends, Clo, and would not, wert thou ten times a Duchess."

"Nay, not I," answered her Grace. "Not I."

"There be not many of us left," said Sir Christopher, ruefully. "Thy poor old Dad is under sod, and others with him. Two necks were broke in hunting, the others died of years or drink."

"But one we know naught of, egad!" said my Lord Eldershawe, "and he was my kinsman."

"Lord, yes," cried out the other; "Jack Oxon! Jack, who came among us all curls and essences and brocades and lace. Thou'st not forgot Jack Oxon, Clo, for the fellow was wild in love with thee."

"No, I have not forgotten Sir John," she answered, and turned aside a little to break a rose from a bush near her and hold it to her face.

"Nay, that she hath not," cried Sir Christopher, "that I can swear to. I saw the boy and girl to-day, Clo, and, Lord! how they are like to him."

"Yes, they are like him," she answered, gravely.

"The two thou show'dst me playing 'neath the trees?" said Eldershawe.

"Ay, they are like enough."

"And but for her Grace would have been brought up a hang-dog thief and a poor drab, with all their beauty," went on Sir Christopher. "Ecod, thou hast done well, Clo, the task 'twas thy whim to take upon thyself."

"What generous deed was that?" asked my lord Duke of Osmonde, drawing near.

"The task of undoing the wrongs a villain had done, if 'twere so there could be undoing of them," answered the old fellow. "A woman rich as I," said she, "should set herself some good work to do. This shall be mine--to live John Oxon's life again and make it bring forth good instead of evil."

Her Grace sate motionless and so did Mistress Anne, who had sunk back in her chair, and in the starlit darkness had grown more white, and was

breathing faint and quickly. In the park below the people laughed as merry-makers will, in gay bursts, and half a dozen voices broke forth into a snatch of song. 'Twas a good background for Sir Christopher, who was well launched upon a subject that he loved and had not often chance to hold forth upon, as her Grace was not fond of touching upon it.

"Ten years hath she followed his wicked footsteps and I have followed with her," he rambled on. "I am not squeamish, Lord knoweth! and have no reason to be; but had I known, when I began to aid in the searching, what mire I should have to wade through, ecod! I think I should have said, 'Let ill alone.'"

"But you did not, old friend," said the Duchess's rich, low voice; "you did not."

Lady Betty and her swains had sauntered near and joined the circle, attracted by the subject which waked in them a new interest in an old mystery.

"You have been her Grace's almoner, Sir Christopher," said her ladyship. "That accounts for the stories I have heard of your charities. They were her Grace's good deeds, not your own."

"She knew I would sweep the kennel for her on hands and knees if she would have me," said Sir Chris, "and at the first of it she knew not the ill quarters of the town as I did, and bade me make search for her

and ask questions. But 'twas not long before she found her way herself and learned that a tall, strong beauty can do more to reach hearts than a red-faced old man can. Lord, how they love and fear her! And among the honest folk Jack Oxon wronged--poor tradesmen he ruined by his trickery, and simple working-folk who lost their all through him--they would kiss the dust her shoe hath trod. His debts she hath paid, his victims she hath rescued, the wounds he dealt she hath healed and made sound flesh, and for ten years she hath done it!"

Her Grace rose to her feet, the rose uplifted in a listening gesture. From the park below there floated up the lilting music of a dance, a light, unrustic measure played by their own musicians.

"The dancing begins," she said. "Hark! the dancing begins."

Mistress Anne put out her hand and caught at her sister's dress and held a fold of its richness in her trembling hand, though her Grace was not aware of what she did.

"How sweet the music sounds," the poor gentlewoman said, nervously.

"How sweet it sounds."

My Lady Betty Tantillion held up her hand as the Duchess, a moment since, had held the rose.

"I have heard that tune before," she cried.

"And I," said Lord Charles.

"And I," Sir Harry Granville echoed.

Lady Betty broke into a shiver.

"Why," she cried, "how strange--at just this moment. We danced to it at the ball at Dunstanwolde House the very night 'twas made known Sir John Oxon had disappeared."

The Duchess held the rose poised in her hand and slowly bent her head.

"Yes," she said, "'tis the very tune."

She stood among them--my lord Duke remembered it later--the centre figure of a sort of circle, some sitting, some standing--his Grace of Marlborough, Mistress Anne, Osmonde himself, the country gentlemen, my Lady Betty and her swains, and others who drew near. She was the centre, standing in the starlight, her rose held in her hand.

"Lord, 'twas a strange thing," said Sir Christopher, thoughtfully, "that a man could disappear like that and leave no trace--no trace."

"Has--all enquiry--ceased?" her Grace asked, quietly.

"There was not much even at first, save from his creditors," said Lord Charles, with a laugh.

"Ay, but 'twas strange," said old Sir Christopher. "I've thought and thought what could have come of him. Why, Clo, thou wast the one who saw him last. What dost thou think?"

In the park below there was a sudden sweet swelling of the music: the dancers had joined in with their voices.

"Yes," said the Duchess, "'twas I who saw him last." And for a few seconds all paused to listen to the melody in the air. But Sir Christopher came back to his theme.

"What sort of humour was the man in?" he asked. "Did he complain of 's lot?"

Her Grace hesitated a second, as one who thought, and then shook her head.

"No," she answered, and no other word.

"Did he speak of taking a journey?" said Lady Betty.

And the Duchess shook her head slow again, and answered as before, "No."

And the music swelled with fresh added voices, and floated up gayer and more sweet.

"Was he dressed for travel?" asked Lord Charles, he being likely to think first of the meaning of a man's dress.

"No," said her Grace.

And then my lord Duke drew near behind her, and spoke over her shoulder.

"Did he bid you any farewell?" he said.

She had not known he was so close, and gave a great start and dropped her rose upon the terrace. Before she answered, she stooped herself and picked it up.

"No," she said, very low. "No; none."

"Then," his Grace said, "I will tell you what I think."

"You!" said my Lady Betty. "Has your Grace thought?"

"Often," he answered. "Who has not, at some time? I--knew more of the man than many. More than once his life touched mine."

"Yours!" they cried.

He waved his hand with the gesture of a man who would sweep away some memory.

"Yes," he said; "once I saw the end of a poor soul he had maddened, and 'twas a cruel thing." He turned his face towards his wife.

"The morning that he left your Grace," he said, "'tis my thought he went not far."

"Not far?" the party exclaimed, but the Duchess joined not in the chorus.

"Between Dunstanwolde House and his lodgings," he went on, "lie some of the worst haunts in London. He was well known there, and not by friends but by enemies. Perchance some tortured creature who owed him a bitter debt may have lain in wait and paid it."

The Duchess turned and gazed at him with large eyes.

"What--" she said, almost hoarsely, "what do you mean?"

"There were men," he answered, gravely--"husbands, fathers, and brothers--there were women he had driven to despair and madness, who



might well have struck him down."

"You mean," said her Grace, almost in a whisper, "you mean that he--was murdered?"

"Nay," he replied, "not murdered--struck a frenzied blow and killed, and it might have been by one driven mad with anguish and unknowing what he did."

Her Grace caught her breath.

"As 'twas with the poor man I told you of," she broke forth as if in eagerness, "the one who died on Tyburn Tree?"

"Yes," was his answer.

"Perhaps--you are right," she said, and passed her hand across her brow; "perhaps--you--are right."

"But there was found no trace," Sir Christopher cried out; "no trace."

"Ah!" said my lord Duke, slowly, "that is the mystery. A dead man's body is not easy hid."

The Duchess broke forth laughing--almost wildly. The whole group started at the sound.

"Nay, nay!" she cried. "What dark things do we talk of! Sir Christopher, Sir Christopher, 'twas you who set us on. A dead man's body is not easy hid!"

"'Tis enough to make a woman shudder," cried Lady Betty, hysterically.

"Yes," said her Grace. "See, I am shuddering--I, who am built of Wildairs iron and steel." And she held out her hands to them--her white hands--and indeed they were trembling like leaves.

The evil thing they had spoke of had surely sunk deep into her soul and troubled it, though she had so laughed and lightly changed the subject of their talk, for in the night she had an awful dream, and her lord, wakened from deep slumber--as he had been once before--started up to behold her standing in the middle of the chamber--a tall white figure with its arms outflung as if in wild despair, while she cried out in frenzy to the darkness.

"I have killed thee--I have killed thee," she wailed, "though I meant it not--even hell itself doth know. Thou art a dead man--and this is the worst of all!"

"'Tis a dream," he cried aloud to her and clutched her in his warm, strong arms. "'Tis a dream--a dream! Awake!--Awake!--Awake!"

And she awoke and fell upon her knees, sobbing as those sob who are roused from such a horror.

"A dream!--a dream!--a dream!" she cried. "And 'tis you awake me!  
You--Gerald--Gerald!--And I have been ten years--ten years your wife!"