

## CHAPTER XXXII

In the Turret Chamber--and in Camylott Wood

When the great soldier returned to Blenheim Castle, his Grace of Osmonde bore him company and having spent a few days in his society at that great house returned to town, from whence he came again to Camylott.

He reached there on a heavenly day, which seemed to him more peaceful and more sweet than any day the summer had so far brought, though it had been a fair one. Many days had been bright and full of flower-scent and rustling of green leaves, and overarched by tender blueness with white clouds softly floating therein, but this one, as he rode, he thought held something in its beauty which seemed to make the earth seem nearer Heaven and Heaven more fair to lifted mortal eyes. He thought this as his horse bore him over the white road, he thought it as he rode across the moor, 'twas in his mind as he passed through the village and saw the white cottages standing warm and peaceful in the sunshine, with good wives at the doors or at their windows, and children playing on the green, who stopped and bobbed courtesies to him or pulled their forelocks, grinning.

Joan Bush was at her gate and stepped out and dipped a courtesy with appealing civility.

"Your Grace," she said, "if I might make so bold--poor Mistress Anne--"  
And having said so much checked herself in much confusion. "I lose my  
wits," she said; "your Grace's pardon. Your Grace has been, to town and  
but now comes back, and will not know. But we so love the kind  
gentlewoman--" and she mopped her eyes.

"You mean that Mistress Anne is worse?" he said.

"The poor lady fell into a sudden strange swoon but an hour ago," she  
answered. "My Matthew, who was at the Tower of an errand said she came  
in from the flower-garden and sank lifeless. And the servants who  
carried her to her chamber say 'twas like death. And she hath been so  
long fading. And we know full well the end must come soon."

My lord Duke rode on. A fulness tightened his throat and he looked up  
at the blue sky.

"Poor Anne! Kind Anne!" he said. "Pure heart! I could think 'twas for  
the passing of her soul the day was made so fair."

At the park gates the woman from the lodge stood at her door and made  
her obeisance tearfully. She was an honest soul to whom her Grace's  
sister seemed a saint from Heaven.

"What is the last news?" said my lord Duke, speaking more from kindness

than aught else.

"That the dear lady lies in her bed in the Turret chamber and her Grace watches with her alone. Oh, my lord Duke, God calls another angel to Himself this day!"

The very air was still with a strange stillness. The Tower itself rose white and clear against the blue as though its battlements and fair turrets might be part of the Eternal City. This strange fancy passed through his Grace's mind as he rode towards it. The ivy hung thick about the window of Anne's chamber in the South Tower. 'Twas a room she loved and had spent long, peaceful days in, and had fitted as a little shrine. Her lovingness had taught her to feed the doves from it, and they had grown to be her friends and companions, and now a little cloud of them flew about and lighted on the turrets and clung to the festoons of ivy, and flew softly about as if they were drawn to the place by some strange knowledge and waited for that which was to come to pass. Two or three sate upon the deep window-ledge and cooed as if they told those not so near what they could see inside the quiet room.

On the terrace below the elder children stood John and Gerald and Daphne and Anne. They waited too, as the doves did, and their young faces were lifted that they might watch the window, and they were very sweet and gravely tender and unafraid and fair.

When their father drew near them 'twas the child Daphne who spoke,

putting her hand in his and meeting his eyes with a lovely look.

"Father," she said, "we think that Mother Anne lies dying in her room. We are not afraid; mother has told us that to die is only as if a bird was let to fly out into the blue sky. And mother is with her, and we are waiting because we think--perhaps--we are not sure--but perhaps we might see her soul fly out of the window like a white bird. It seems as if the doves were waiting too."

My lord Duke kissed her and passed on.

"You may see it," he said, gently. "Who knows--and if you see it, sure it will be white."

And he went quietly through the house and up the staircase leading to Anne's tower-chamber, and the pretty apartment her Grace had prepared for her so lovingly to spend quiet hours in when she would be alone. This apartment led into the chamber, but now it was quite empty, for the Duchess was with her sister, who lay on the bed in the room within, where the ivy hung in festoons about the high window, which seemed to look up into the blue sky itself and shut out all the earth below and only look on Heaven.

To enter seemed like entering some sacred shrine where a pure saint lay, and upon the threshold his Grace lingered, almost fearing to go in and break upon the awful tenderness of this last hour, and the last

words he heard the loving creature murmuring, while the being she had so worshipped knelt beside her.

"'Twas love," he heard, "'twas love. What matter if I gave my soul for you?"

He drew back with a quick sad beat of the heart. Poor, tender soul--poor woman who had loved and given no sign--and only in her dying dared to speak.

And then there came a cry--and 'twas the voice of her he loved--and he stood spellbound. 'Twas a cry of anguish--of fear--of horror and dismay. 'Twas her voice as he had heard it ring out in the blackness of her dream--her dear voice harsh with woe and broken into moaning--her dear voice which he had heard murmuring love to him--crooning over her children--laughing like music! And the torrent of words which she poured forth made his blood cold, and yet as they fell upon his ear he knew--yes, now he knew--revealed no new story to him, even though it had been until that hour untold. No, 'twas not new, for through many an hour when he had marked the shadow in her eyes he had vaguely guessed some fatal burden lay upon her soul--and had striven to understand.

"And then I struck him with my whip," he heard, "knowing nothing, not seeing, only striking like a goaded, dying thing. And he fell--he fell--and all was done."

None heard or saw my lord Duke when, later, he passed out from the empty room. He went forth into the fair day again, and through the Park and into Camylott Wood. The deep amber light was there, and the gold-green stillness, and he passed onward till he reached the great wood's depths, and stood beneath an oak-tree's broad-spread branches, leaning his back against the huge rough trunk, his arms folded.

This was her secret burden--this. And Nature had so moulded him that he could look upon it with just, unflinching eyes, his soul filled with a god-like, awful pity.

In a walled-in cellar in the deserted Dunstanwolde House lay, waiting for the call of Judgment Day, a handful of evil dust which once had been a man--one whose each day of life from his youth upward had seemed, as it had passed, to leave black dregs in some poor fellow-creature's cup. One frantic, unthinking blow struck in terror and madness had ended him and all his evil doing, but left her standing frenzied at the awfulness of the thing which had fallen upon her soul in her first hour of Heaven. And all her being had risen in revolt at this most monstrous woe of chance, and in her torture she had cried out that in that hour she would not be struck down.

"Of ending his base life I had never thought," he had heard her wail, "though I had thought to end my own. But when Fate struck the blow for me, I swore that carrion should not taint my whole life through."

To atone for this she had lived her life of passionate penance. Remembering this, she had prayed Heaven strike and blight her, in fear that she herself should blight the noble and the innocent things she loved. And while she had thought she bore the burden all alone, the gentle sister, who had so worshipped her, had known her secret and borne it with her silently. In dying she had revealed it, with trembling and piteous love, and this my lord Duke had heard, and her pure words as she had died.

"Anne! Anne!" the anguished voice had cried. "Must he know--my Gerald? Must I tell him all? If so I must, I will--upon my knees!"

"Nay, tell him not," was faintly breathed in answer. "Let God tell him--who understands."

"'Tis in myself," my lord Duke said at last, through his shut teeth, "'tis in myself to have struck the blow, and had I done it and found him lie dead before me--in her dear name I swear, and in a new shriven soul's presence, for sure the pure thing is near--I would have hid it as she has done; for naught should have torn her from me! And for her sin, if sin it is counted, I will atone with her; and as she does her penance, will do mine. And if, at the end of all things, she be called to Judgment Bar, I will go with her and stand by her side. For her life is my life, and her soul my soul, her sentence my sentence; and being her love I will bear it with her, and pray Him who judges to lay the

burden heavier upon me than upon her."

And he went back to the Tower and up the stairway to the turret-chamber, and there Mistress Anne lay still and calm and sweet as a child asleep, and flowers and fair chaplets lay all about her white bed and on her breast and in her small, worn hands, and garlanded her pillow. And the setting sun had sent a shaft of golden glory through the window to touch her hair and the blossoms lying on it.

And her sister stood beside her and looked down. And a new peace was on her face when she laid her cheek upon her husband's breast as he enfolded her.

"She is my saint," she said. "To-day she has taken my sins in her pure hands to God and has asked mercy on them."

"And so having done, dear Heart," he answered her, "she lies amid her flowers, and smiles."

But of that he had overheard he said no word. And if as time passed there came some sacred hour when, their souls being one, there could be no veil not rent away by Love and Nature, and the secret each had kept was revealed to the other, 'twas surely so revealed as but to draw them closer and fill them with higher nobleness, for no other human creature

heard of it or guessed.

So it befel that one man met his deserts by chance, and none were punished, and only good grew out of his evil grave. And should there be a Power who for strange, high reasons calls forth helpless souls from peaceful Nothingness to relentless Life, and judges all Life does and leaves undone, 'tis surely sate to trust its honesty and justice.