

**CHAPTER XI**

Brandon Beeches, in the Thames valley, was the seat of Sir Charles Brandon, seventh baronet of that name. He had lost his father before attaining his majority, and had married shortly afterwards; so that in his twenty-fifth year he was father to three children. He was a little worn, in spite of his youth, but he was tall and agreeable, had a winning way of taking a kind and soothing view of the misfortunes of others, could tell a story well, liked music and could play and sing a little, loved the arts of design and could sketch a little in water colors, read every magazine from London to Paris that criticised pictures, had travelled a little, fished a little, shot a little, botanized a little, wandered restlessly in the footsteps of women, and dissipated his energies through all the small channels that his wealth opened and his talents made easy to him. He had no large knowledge of any subject, though he had looked into many just far enough to replace absolute unconsciousness of them with measurable ignorance. Never having enjoyed the sense of achievement, he was troubled with unsatisfied aspirations that filled him with melancholy and convinced him that he was a born artist. His wife found him selfish, peevish, hankering after change, and prone to believe that he was attacked by dangerous disease when he was only catching cold.

Lady Brandon, who believed that he understood all the subjects he talked about because she did not understand them herself, was one of his disappointments. In person she resembled none of the types of beauty striven after by the painters of her time, but she had charms to which few men are insensible. She was tall, soft, and stout, with ample and shapely arms, shoulders, and hips. With her small head, little ears, pretty lips, and roguish eye, she, being a very large creature, presented an immensity of half womanly, half infantile loveliness which smote even grave men with a desire to clasp her in their arms and kiss her. This desire had scattered the desultory intellectual culture of Sir Charles at first sight. His imagination invested her with the taste for the fine arts which he required from a wife, and he married her in her first season, only to discover that the amativeness in her temperament was so little and languid that she made all his attempts at fondness ridiculous, and robbed the caresses for which he had longed of all their anticipated ecstasy. Intellectually she fell still further short of his hopes. She looked upon his favorite art of painting as a pastime for amateur and a branch of the house-furnishing trade for professional artists. When he was discussing it among his friends, she would offer her opinion with a presumption which was the more trying as she frequently blundered upon a sound conclusion whilst he was reasoning his way to a hollow one with his utmost subtlety and seriousness. On such occasions his disgust did not trouble her in the least; she triumphed in it. She had concluded that marriage was a greater folly, and men greater fools, than she had supposed; but such beliefs rather lightened her sense of responsibility than disappointed her, and, as she had plenty of money, plenty of servants, plenty of visitors, and plenty of exercise on horseback, of which she was immoderately fond, her time passed pleasantly enough. Comfort seemed to her the natural order of life; trouble always surprised her. Her husband's friends, who mistrusted every future hour, and found matter for bitter reflection in many past ones, were to her only examples of the power of sedentary habits and excessive reading to make men tripped and dull.

One fine May morning, as she cantered along the avenue at Brandon Beeches on a powerful bay horse, the gates at the end opened and a young man sped through them on a bicycle. He was of slight frame, with fine dark eyes and delicate nostrils. When he recognized Lady Brandon he waved his cap, and when they met he sprang from his inanimate steed, at which the bay horse shied.

"Don't, you silly beast!" she cried, whacking the animal with the butt of her whip. "Though it's natural enough, goodness knows! How d'ye do? The idea of anyone rich enough to afford a horse riding on a wheel like that!"

"But I am not rich enough to afford a horse," he said, approaching her to pat the bay, having placed the bicycle against a tree. "Besides, I am afraid of horses, not being accustomed to them; and I know nothing about feeding them. My steed needs no food. He doesn't bite nor kick. He never goes lame, nor sickens, nor dies, nor needs a groom, nor--"

"That's all bosh," said Lady Brandon impetuously. "It stumbles, and gives you the most awful tosses, and it goes lame by its treadles and thingamejigs coming off, and it wears out, and is twice as much trouble to keep clean and scrape the mud off as a horse, and all sorts of things. I think the most ridiculous sight in the world is a man on a bicycle, working away with his feet as hard as he possibly can, and believing that his horse is carrying him instead of, as anyone can see, he carrying the horse. You needn't tell me that it isn't easier to walk in the ordinary way than to drag a great dead iron thing along with you. It's not good sense."

"Nevertheless I can carry it a hundred miles further in a day than I can carry myself alone. Such are the marvels of machinery. But I know that we cut a very poor figure beside you and that magnificent creature not that anyone will look at me whilst you are by to occupy their attention so much more worthily."

She darted a glance at him which clouded his vision and made his heart beat more strongly. This was an old habit of hers. She kept it up from love of fun, having no idea of the effect it produced on more ardent temperaments than her own. He continued hastily:

"Is Sir Charles within doors?"

"Oh, it's the most ridiculous thing I ever heard of in my life," she exclaimed. "A man that lives by himself in a place down by the Riverside Road like a toy savings bank--don't you know the things I mean?--called Sallust's House, says there is a right of way through our new pleasure ground. As if anyone could have any right there after all the money we have spent fencing it on three sides, and building up the wall by the road, and levelling, and planting, and draining, and goodness knows what else! And now the man says that all the common people and tramps in the neighborhood have a right to walk across it because they are too lazy to go round by the road. Sir Charles has gone to see the man about it. Of course he wouldn't do as I wanted him."

"What was that?"

"Write to tell the man to mind his own business, and to say that the first person we found attempting to trespass on our property should be given to the police."

"Then I shall find no one at home. I beg your pardon for calling it so, but it is the only place like home to me."

"Yes; it is so comfortable since we built the billiard room and took away those nasty hangings in the hall. I was ever so long trying to per--"

She was interrupted by an old laborer, who hobbled up as fast as his rheumatism would allow him, and began to speak without further ceremony than snatching off his cap.

"Th'ave coom to the noo groups, my lady, crowds of 'em. An' a parson with 'em, an' a flag! Sur Chorles he don't know what to say; an' sooch doin's never was."

Lady Brandon turned pale and pulled at her horse as if to back him out of some danger. Her visitor, puzzled, asked the old man what he meant.

"There's goin' to be a proceyshon through the noo groups," he replied, "an' the master can't stop 'em. Th'ave throon down the wall; three yards of it is lyin' on Riverside Road. An' there's a parson with 'em, and a flag. An' him that lives in Sallust's hoos, he's there, hoddin'em on."

"Thrown down the wall!" exclaimed Lady Brandon, scarlet with indignation and pale with apprehension by turns. "What a disgraceful thing! Where are the police? Chester, will you come with me and see what they are doing? Sir Charles is no use. Do you think there is any danger?"

"There's two police," said the old man, "an' him that lives at Sallust's dar'd them stop him. They're lookin' on. An' there's a parson among 'em. I see him pullin' away at the wall with his own han's."

"I will go and see the fun," said Chester.

Lady Brandon hesitated. But her anger and curiosity vanquished her fears. She overtook the bicycle, and they went together through the gates and by the highroad to the scene the old man had described. A heap of bricks and mortar lay in the roadway on each side of a breach in the newly built wall, over which Lady Brandon, from her eminence on horseback, could see, coming towards her across the pleasure ground, a column of about thirty persons. They marched three abreast in good order and in silence; the expression of all except a few mirthful faces being that of devotees fulfilling a rite. The gravity of the procession was deepened by the appearance of a clergyman in its ranks, which were composed of men of the middle class, and a few workmen carrying a banner inscribed THE SOIL or ENGLAND THE BIRTHRIGHT OF ALL HER PEOPLE. There were also four women, upon whom Lady Brandon looked with intense indignation and contempt. None of the men of the neighborhood had dared to join; they stood in the road whispering, and occasionally venturing to laugh at the jests of a couple of tramps who had stopped to see the fun, and who cared nothing for Sir Charles.

He, standing a little way within the field, was remonstrating angrily with a man of his own class, who stood with his back to the breach and his hands in the pockets of his snuff-colored clothes, contemplating the procession with elate satisfaction. Lady Brandon, at once suspecting that this was the man from Sallust's House, and encouraged by the loyalty of the crowd, most of whom made way for her and touched their hats, hit the bay horse smartly with her whip and rode him, with a clatter of hoofs and scattering of clods, right at the snuff-colored enemy, who had to spring hastily aside to avoid her. There was a roar of laughter from the roadway, and the man turned sharply on her. But he suddenly smiled affably, replaced his hands in his pockets after raising his hat, and said:

"How do you do, Miss Carpenter? I thought you were a charge of cavalry."

"I am not Miss Carpenter, I am Lady Brandon; and you ought to be ashamed of yourself, Mr. Smilash, if it is you that have brought these disgraceful people here."

His eyes as he replied were eloquent with reproach to her for being no longer Miss Carpenter. "I am not Smilash," he said; "I am Sidney Trefusis. I have just had the pleasure of meeting Sir Charles for the first time, and we shall be the best friends possible when I have convinced him that it is hardly fair to seize on a path belonging to the people and compel them to walk a mile and a half round his estate instead of four hundred yards between two portions of it."

"I have already told you, sir," said Sir Charles, "that I intend to open a still shorter path, and to allow all the well-conducted work-people to pass through twice a day. This will enable them to go to their work and return from it; and I will be at the cost of keeping the path in repair."

"Thank you," said Trefusis drily; "but why should we trouble you when we have a path of our own to use fifty times a day if we choose, without any man barring our way until our conduct happens to please him? Besides, your next heir would probably shut the path up the moment he came into possession."

"Offering them a path is just what makes them impudent," said Lady Brandon to her husband. "Why did you promise them anything? They would not think it a hardship to walk a mile and a half, or twenty miles, to a public-house, but when they go to their work they think it dreadful to have to walk a yard. Perhaps they would like us to lend them the wagonette to drive in?"

"I have no doubt they would," said Trefusis, beaming at her.

"Pray leave me to manage here, Jane; this is no place for you. Bring Erskine to the house. He must be--"

"Why don't the police make them go away?" said Lady Brandon, too excited to listen to her husband.

"Hush, Jane, pray. What can three men do against thirty or forty?"

"They ought to take up somebody as an example to the rest."

"They have offered, in the handsomest manner, to arrest me if Sir Charles will give me in charge," said Trefusis.

"There!" said Lady Jane, turning to her husband. "Why don't you give him--or someone--in charge?"

"You know nothing about it," said Sir Charles, vexed by a sense that she was publicly making him ridiculous.

"If you don't, I will," she persisted. "The idea of having our ground broken into and our new wall knocked down! A nice state of things it would be if people were allowed to do as they liked with other peoples' property. I will give every one of them in charge."

"Would you consign me to a dungeon?" said Trefusis, in melancholy tones.

"I don't mean you exactly," she said, relenting. "But I will give that clergyman into charge, because he ought to know better. He is the ringleader of the whole thing."

"He will be delighted, Lady Brandon; he pines for martyrdom. But will you really give him into custody?"

"I will," she said vehemently, emphasizing the assurance by a plunge in the saddle that made the bay stagger.

"On what charge?" he said, patting the horse and looking up at her.

"I don't care what charge," she replied, conscious that she was being admired, and not displeased. "Let them take him up, that's all."

Human beings on horseback are so far centaurs that liberties taken with their horses are almost as personal as liberties taken with themselves. When Sir Charles saw Trefusis patting the bay he felt as much outraged as if Lady Brandon herself were being patted, and he felt bitterly towards her for permitting the familiarity. He was relieved by the arrival of the procession. It halted as the leader came up to Trefusis, who said gravely:

"Gentlemen, I congratulate you on the firmness with which you have this day asserted the rights of the people of this place to the use of one of the few scraps of mother earth of which they have not been despoiled."

"Gentlemen," shouted an excited member of the procession, "three cheers for the resumption of the land of England by the people of England! Hip, hip, hurrah!"

The cheers were given with much spirit, Sir Charles's cheeks becoming redder at each repetition. He looked angrily at the clergyman, now distracted by the charms of Lady Brandon, whose scorn, as she surveyed the crowd, expressed itself by a pout which became her pretty lips extremely.

Then a middle-aged laborer stepped from the road into the field, hat in hand, ducked respectfully, and said: "Look 'e here, Sir Charles. Don't 'e mind them fellers. There ain't a man belonging to this neighborhood among 'em; not one in your employ or on your land. Our dooty to you and your ladyship, and we will trust to you to do what is fair by us. We want no interlopers from Lunnon to get us into trouble with your honor,

and--"

"You unmitigated cur," exclaimed Trefusis fiercely, "what right have you to give away to his unborn children the liberty of your own?"

"They're not unborn," said Lady Brandon indignantly. "That just shows how little you know about it."

"No, nor mine either," said the man, emboldened by her ladyship's support. "And who are you that call me a cur?"

"Who am I! I am a rich man--one of your masters, and privileged to call you what I please. You are a grovelling famine-broken slave. Now go and seek redress against me from the law. I can buy law enough to ruin you for less money than it would cost me to shoot deer in Scotland or vermin here. How do you like that state of things? Eh?"

The man was taken aback. "Sir Charles will stand by me," he said, after a pause, with assumed confidence, but with an anxious glance at the baronet.

"If he does, after witnessing the return you have made me for standing by you, he is a greater fool than I take him to be."

"Gently, gently," said the clergyman. "There is much excuse to be made for the poor fellow."

"As gently as you please with any man that is a free man at heart," said Trefusis; "but slaves must be driven, and this fellow is a slave to the marrow."

"Still, we must be patient. He does not know--"

"He knows a great deal better than you do," said Lady Brandon, interrupting. "And the more shame for you, because you ought to know best. I suppose you were educated somewhere. You will not be satisfied with yourself when your bishop hears of this. Yes," she added, turning to Trefusis with an infantile air of wanting to cry and being forced to laugh against her will, "you may laugh as much as you please--don't trouble to pretend it's only coughing--but we will write to his bishop, as he shall find to his cost."

"Hold your tongue, Jane, for God's sake," said Sir Charles, taking her horse by the bridle and backing him from Trefusis.

"I will not. If you choose to stand here and allow them to walk away with the walls in their pockets, I don't, and won't. Why cannot you make the police do something?"

"They can do nothing," said Sir Charles, almost beside himself with humiliation. "I cannot do anything until I see my solicitor. How can you bear to stay here wrangling with these fellows? It is SO undignified!"

"It's all very well to talk of dignity, but I don't see the dignity of letting people trample on our grounds without leave. Mr. Smilash, will you make them all go away, and tell them that they shall all be prosecuted and put in prison?"

"They are going to the crossroads, to hold a public meeting and--of course--make speeches. I am desired to say that they deeply regret that their demonstration should have disturbed you personally, Lady Brandon."

"So they ought," she replied. "They don't look very sorry. They are getting frightened at what they have done, and they would be glad to escape the consequences by apologizing, most likely. But they shan't. I am not such

a fool as they think."

"They don't think so. You have proved the contrary."

"Jane," said Sir Charles pettishly, "do you know this gentleman?"

"I should think I do," said Lady Brandon emphatically.

Trefusis bowed as if he had just been formally introduced to the baronet, who, against his will, returned the salutation stiffly, unable to ignore an older, firmer, and quicker man under the circumstances.

"This seems an unneighborly business, Sir Charles," said Trefusis, quite at his ease; "but as it is a public question, it need not prejudice our private relations. At least I hope not."

Sir Charles bowed again, more stiffly than before.

"I am, like you, a capitalist and landlord."

"Which it seems to me you have no right to be, if you are in earnest," struck in Chester, who had been watching the scene in silence by Sir Charles's side.

"Which, as you say, I have undoubtedly no right to be," said Trefusis, surveying him with interest; "but which I nevertheless cannot help being. Have I the pleasure of speaking to Mr. Chichester Erskine, author of a tragedy entitled 'The Patriot Martyrs,' dedicated with enthusiastic devotion to the Spirit of Liberty and half a dozen famous upholders of that principle, and denouncing in forcible language the tyranny of the late Tsar of Russia, Bomba of Naples, and Napoleon the Third?"

"Yes, sir," said Erskine, reddening; for he felt that this description might make his drama seem ridiculous to those present who had not read it.

"Then," said Trefusis, extending his hand--Erskine at first thought for a hearty shake--"give me half-a-crown towards the cost of our expedition here to-day to assert the right of the people to tread the soil we are standing upon."

"You shall do nothing of the sort, Chester," cried Lady Brandon. "I never heard of such a thing in my life! Do you pay us for the wall and fence your people have broken, Mr. Smilash; that would be more to the purpose."

"If I could find a thousand men as practical as you, Lady Brandon, I might accomplish the next great revolution before the end of this season." He looked at her for a moment curiously, as if trying to remember; and then added inconsequently: "How are your friends? There was a Miss--Miss--I am afraid I have forgotten all the names except your own."

"Gertrude Lindsay is staying with us. Do you remember her?"

"I think--no, I am afraid I do not. Let me see. Was she a haughty young lady?"

"Yes," said Lady Brandon eagerly, forgetting the wall and fence. "But who do you think is coming next Thursday? I met her accidentally the last time I was in town. She's not a bit changed. You can't forget her, so don't pretend to be puzzled."

"You have not told me who she is yet. And I shall probably not remember her. You must not expect me to recognize everyone instantaneously, as I recognized you."

"What stuff! You will know Agatha fast enough."

"Agatha Wylie!" he said, with sudden gravity.

"Yes. She is coming on Thursday. Are you glad?"

"I fear I shall have no opportunity of seeing her."

"Oh, of course you must see her. It will be so jolly for us all to meet again just as we used. Why can't you come to luncheon on Thursday?"

"I shall be delighted, if you will really allow me to come after my conduct here."

"The lawyers will settle that. Now that you have found out who we are you will stop pulling down our walls, of course."

"Of course," said Trefusis, smiling, as he took out a pocket diary and entered the engagement. "I must hurry away to the crossroads. They have probably voted me into the chair by this time, and are waiting for me to open their meeting. Good-bye. You have made this place, which I was growing tired of, unexpectedly interesting to me."

They exchanged glances of the old college pattern. Then he nodded to Sir Charles, waved his hand familiarly to Erskine, and followed the procession, which was by this time out of sight.

Sir Charles, who, waiting to speak, had been repeatedly baffled by the hasty speeches of his wife and the unhesitating replies of Trefusis, now turned angrily upon her, saying:

"What do you mean by inviting that fellow to my house?"

"Your house, indeed! I will invite whom I please. You are getting into one of your tempers."

Sir Charles looked about him. Erskine had discreetly slipped away, and was in the road, tightening a screw in his bicycle. The few persons who remained were out of earshot.

"Who and what the devil is he, and how do you come to know him?" he demanded. He never swore in the presence of any lady except his wife, and then only when they were alone.

"He is a gentleman, which is more than you are," she retorted, and, with a cut of her whip that narrowly missed her husband's shoulder, sent the bay plunging through the gap.

"Come along," she said to Erskine. "We shall be late for luncheon."

"Had we not better wait for Sir Charles?" he asked injudiciously.

"Never mind Sir Charles, he is in the sulks," she said, without abating her voice. "Come along." And she went off at a canter, Erskine following her with a misgiving that his visit was unfortunately timed.