

AN OLD CORNWALL ROMANCE.

By C. A. MACIRONE.

CHAPTER IV.

DAME THOMASINE PERCYVALL, LADY MAYORESS
OF LONDON.

"Daughter I am in my mother's house,
But mistress in my own."

Rudyard Kipling.

It was in such a vigorous and useful domestic life, as was described from old writers in our last chapter, that the little peasant-girl developed her remarkable ability and her discrimination of character. It served her well and guided her when her wealth and lonely position again made her an object of pursuit among the courtiers and gentlemen of the period.

In this strange history, which does indeed repeat itself, we see for the second time Thomasine left a widow. An old chronicler says of her:—

"The fame of the virtue, wealth and beauty of the said Thomasine spread itself over the City of London, so that persons of the greatest magnitude of wealth and dignity there courted her. Among the rest, it was the fortune of John Percyvall Esquire, goldsmith and usurer [that is to say banker] to prevail upon her to become his wife."

He was very wealthy and of high repute; alderman of his ward, and besides a man whose noble character and private history had won her regard before he gained her affection.

So he wooed and won the "golden widow," for so, because of her double inheritance of the wealth of two rich husbands, she was merrily named.

Their wedding (about the year 1480) was made a kind of public festival, and the bride, in acknowledgment of her own large possessions, was invested with a stately dowry at the church door.

We have given some description from old writers of the sort of household (in large houses) that was, over which Thomasine was called to rule. It must have been a life of incessant responsibility and activity amongst her numerous dependents, amidst all the anxieties and disorders of that restless age.

There is one matter which must strike everyone in thinking over those domestic duties, and that is, to doubt how far time has dealt kindly with the interests and employments of our homes.

There was then an infinite variety in the home life. There were emulations and rivalries in the productions of various households; in the comparative excellence of their embroideries, the fineness of their naperies, the fame of their still-room productions. All those were matters of common talk and of great interest among well-to-do families. Their brewings and their bakings, the perfection of their laundry work, were topics of infinite discussion amongst neighbours. All this has passed away.

There was also, through the necessary intercourse and intimacy of those forming a household, a much greater fellow-feeling between families and dependents. It was natural, when people worked together, dined at the same board together in hall (whether above or below the salt), and when they shared the common meal, that the bond of loyalty and mutual good-will should be strong.

Now, though a few of the mistresses of the great merchants' households and factories recognise the responsibilities of rulers, still that is not (would that it were) the universal feeling. The old order of nobles still takes the lead in this, as in some other things. That

beloved lady, the late Marchioness of Waterford, now gone from the people she loved and ruled so well, and others have given the work and energy of their lives to the welfare of their dependents.

Another noble lady, personally known to us, of whom we may write, as she is dead, and has gone to her reward for a life of untiring benevolence, used to dispose her leisure so as to allow her, every Sunday, to see all her domestics (men as well as women) alone, to read with them that blessed book, which, in a life of lonely widowhood, was her own guide and comfort. A singular thing happened after one Sunday, when her remarks were on "How great a fire a little spark kindleth," pleading in her graceful and kindly way against the errors of the tongue. That same week, a spark lodged in the oaken flooring of the kitchen, smouldering unperceived, suddenly set light to the beams and panels of the old house and burnt till the beautiful place was levelled to the ground. But not in vain had the busy population of that home become loyal and attached to its mistress. They rushed into the flaming passages, and triumphantly brought out every family relic of value, so that nothing was destroyed but what could be replaced.

Starting up, in a remembrance of the above train of thought, comes a curious incident of a few days since, of a dame who was disturbed in her luxurious boudoir by an announcement that a lady wished to see her. An elderly lady, very plainly dressed appeared, who, when asked what she wanted, answered—

"A young woman has applied for a situation as kitchen-maid in my house, and referred me to you as her late mistress, and I wish to know all you can tell me about her."

"Oh," said the dame haughtily, "I know nothing whatever about my servants; you had better ask my housekeeper!"

"Perhaps you will allow me to see her; for I take great interest in my servants, and like to know about their families." The dame rung the bell, and told the servant to show "this person" to the housekeeper's room.

A little while after, while reflecting on the odd notions of some people, her housekeeper, with a grave face, begged to speak to her.

"Pray, ma'am, did you know who that lady was whom you sent down to my room?"

"Oh, that elderly person?"

"Yes, ma'am; it was the Duchess of X—"

The uneasy feelings which followed may be left to the imagination.

To return to our Lady Mayoress. As her wedding gift of remembrance to her dear old home, she directed that "a firm and steadfast road should be laid down with stones, at her sole cost, along the midst of Green-a-Moor, and fit for man and beast to travel on with their lawful occasions, from Lanstaphadon to the sea (it may be that which runs from Wike St. Marie over Wike Ford, and through Poundstock and little Winsum to Melhac Mouth).

"At another time, and for a New Year's gift, she gave the sum of forty marks towards the building of a tower for St. Stephen's church, above the causeway of Dunkevel, and it was her wish that they should carry their pinnacles so high that they might be seen from Iwannacote Cross, by the moor, to the intent that they who do behold it from the Burgage Mound may remember the poor mayde who is now a wedded dame of London Citie."

One cannot but remember that it was by this Cross, at eventide many years before,

that the London merchant first saw, at this trysting-place, the beautiful girl who was to play such an important part in his home. With increase of wealth came many a renewed token of loving remembrance to her old home and the parents who lived in it; nor did her pure and lofty nature swerve with her elevation or decrease the reverence she paid them. Not content with gifts for their comfort and well-being, she gave that honour to which a special commandment is devoted, and her long and honoured old age was an answer to the fulfilled duty and devotion of her life.

That life went on, still happily and prosperously. In 1486 John Percyvall became Sheriff of London, and in 1498 Lord Mayor, and was knighted by the King. Like his wife, he too was loyal to his birthplace, and amidst the many interests and duties of his position, remembered to endow Macclesfield (near which city he was born) with a free grammar school "because there were few school masters in that country, and the children, for lack of teaching, fell to idleness and consequently live dissolutely all their days."

The poor and the ignorant, the young and the old, seem to have been the unceasing care of Thomasine and her husband. They say a happy life has no history, that of Dame Thomasine Percyvall and her husband may be read in the records of their benefactions.

Thus, by a strange succession of events, the barefooted shepherdess of a Cornish moor had risen to be the Lady Mayoress of Metropolitan fame, and the legend of Thomasine Bonaventura (for it was now well known) became the popular theme of royal and noble interest among the lords and ladies of the Court.

With increase of wealth and power came also many a renewed token of affectionate regard and sterling bounty to her old beloved dwelling-place of Wike St. Marie.

Bacon says, "Great riches are like a heap of manure; on it, if the sun shines, it breeds corruption, but, spread over a wide field, it breeds fertility."

She wisely and beneficently dealt with the riches Heaven had trusted to her, and one of the MS. letters which remain is interesting enough to be quoted here at some length, as it shows so much of the sweet and generous nature power could not debase, nor wealth corrupt, and the honour and reverence the first lady in the greatest city in the world paid to her parents, the poor uneducated peasants of a Cornish village; besides that it is in itself an interesting picture of the manners and Court of Henry VII.

Some years after their marriage Sir John Percyvall and his lady were, as Lord Mayor and Lady Mayoress, bidden to attend the Court of the King, and writing to her mother, as her custom always was, she says in a letter which remains in MS.:

"Sweet mother, thy daughter hath seen the face of the King. We were bydden to a banquet at the royal palace, and Sir John and I could not choose but go. There was such a blaze of lords and ladies in silks and samite and jewels of gold, that it was like the citie of New Jerusalem in the Scriptures, and thy maid Thomasine was arrayed so fine that they brought up the saying that I was dressed like an altar. When we were led into the chamber of dais, where his Highness stood, the King did kiss me on the cheek as the manner is, and he seemed gentle and kind. But then did he turn to my good lord and husband, and say, with a look stark and stern enow, 'Ha, Sir John! See to it that thy fair