

CHAPTER II--In which Sir Jeffry encounters his offspring

In a remote wing of the house, in barren, ill-kept rooms, the poor infants of the dead lady had struggled through their brief lives, and given them up, one after the other. Sir Jeffry had not wished to see them, nor had he done so, but upon the rarest occasions, and then nearly always by some untoward accident. The six who had died, even their mother had scarcely wept for; her weeping had been that they should have been fated to come into the world, and when they went out of it she knew she need not mourn their going as untimely. The two who had not perished, she had regarded sadly day by day, seeing they had no beauty and that their faces promised none. Naught but great beauty would have excused their existence in their father's eyes, as beauty might have helped them to good matches which would have rid him of them. But 'twas the sad ill fortune of the children Anne and Barbara to have been treated by Nature in a way but niggardly. They were pale young misses, with insignificant faces and snub noses, resembling an aunt who died a spinster, as they themselves seemed most likely to. Sir Jeffry could not bear the sight of them, and they fled at the sound of his footsteps, if it so happened that by chance they heard it, huddling together in corners, and slinking behind doors or anything big enough to hide them. They had no playthings and no companions and no pleasures but such as the innocent invention of childhood contrives for itself.

After their mother's death a youth desolate and strange indeed lay before them. A spinster who was a poor relation was the only person of respectable breeding who ever came near them. To save herself from genteel starvation, she had offered herself for the place of governess to them, though she was fitted for the position neither by education nor character. Mistress Margery Wimpole was a poor, dull creature, having no wilful harm in her, but endowed with neither dignity nor wit. She lived in fear of Sir Jeffery, and in fear of the servants, who knew full well that she was an humble dependant, and treated her as one. She hid away with her pupils' in the bare school-room in the west wing, and taught them to spell and write and work samplers. She herself knew no more.

The child who had cost her mother her life had no happier prospect than her sisters. Her father felt her more an intruder than they had been, he being of the mind that to house and feed and clothe, howsoever poorly, these three burdens on him was a drain scarcely to be borne. His wife had been a toast and not a fortune, and his estate not being great, he possessed no more than his drinking, roystering, and gambling made full demands upon.

The child was baptized Clorinda, and bred, so to speak, from her first hour, in the garret and the servants' hall. Once only did her father behold her during her infancy, which event was a mere accident, as he had expressed no wish to see her, and only came upon her in the nurse's arms some weeks after her mother's death. 'Twas quite by chance. The woman,

who was young and buxom, had begun an intrigue with a groom, and having a mind to see him, was crossing the stable-yard, carrying her charge with her, when Sir Jeffry came by to visit a horse.

The woman came plump upon him, entering a stable as he came out of it; she gave a frightened start, and almost let the child drop, at which it set up a strong, shrill cry, and thus Sir Jeffry saw it, and seeing it, was thrown at once into a passion which expressed itself after the manner of all his emotion, and left the nurse quaking with fear.

"Thunder and damnation!" he exclaimed, as he strode away after the encounter; "'tis the ugliest yet. A yellow-faced girl brat, with eyes like an owl's in an ivy-bush, and with a voice like a very peacocks. Another mawking, plain slut that no man will take off my hands."

He did not see her again for six years. But little wit was needed to learn that 'twas best to keep her out of his sight, as her sisters were kept, and this was done without difficulty, as he avoided the wing of the house where the children lived, as if it were stricken with the plague.

But the child Clorinda, it seemed, was of lustier stock than her older sisters, and this those about her soon found out to their grievous disturbance. When Mother Posset had drawn her from under her dead mother's body she had not left shrieking for an hour, but had kept up her fierce cries until the roof rang with them, and the old woman had jogged

her about and beat her back in the hopes of stifling her, until she was exhausted and dismayed. For the child would not be stilled, and seemed to have such strength and persistence in her as surely infant never showed before.

"Never saw I such a brat among all I have brought into the world," old Posset quavered. "She hath the voice of a six-months boy. It cracks my very ears. Hush thee, then, thou little wild cat."

This was but the beginning. From the first she grew apace, and in a few months was a bouncing infant, with a strong back, and a power to make herself heard such as had not before appeared in the family. When she desired a thing, she yelled and roared with such a vigour as left no peace for any creature about her until she was humoured, and this being the case, rather than have their conversation and love-making put a stop to, the servants gave her her way. In this they but followed the example of their betters, of whom we know that it is not to the most virtuous they submit or to the most learned, but to those who, being crossed, can conduct themselves in a manner so disagreeable, shrewish or violent, that life is a burden until they have their will. This the child Clorinda had the infant wit to discover early, and having once discovered it, she never ceased to take advantage of her knowledge. Having found in the days when her one desire was pap, that she had but to roar lustily enough to find it beside her in her porringer, she tried the game upon all other occasions. When she had reached but a twelvemonth, she stood stoutly upon her little feet, and beat her sisters to gain their playthings, and

her nurse for wanting to change her smock. She was so easily thrown into furies, and so raged and stamped in her baby way that she was a sight to behold, and the men-servants found amusement in badgering her. To set Mistress Clorinda in their midst on a winter's night when they were dull, and to torment her until her little face grew scarlet with the blood which flew up into it, and she ran from one to the other beating them and screaming like a young spitfire, was among them a favourite entertainment.

"Ifackens!" said the butler one night, "but she is as like Sir Jeoffry in her temper as one pea is like another. Ay, but she grows blood red just as he does, and curses in her little way as he does in man's words among his hounds in their kennel."

"And she will be of his build, too," said the housekeeper. "What mishap changed her to a maid instead of a boy, I know not. She would have made a strapping heir. She has the thigh and shoulders of a handsome man-child at this hour, and she is not three years old."

"Sir Jeoffry missed his mark when he called her an ugly brat," said the woman who had nursed her. "She will be a handsome woman--though large in build, it may be. She will be a brown beauty, but she will have a colour in her cheeks and lips like the red of Christmas holly, and her owl's eyes are as black as sloes, and have fringes on them like the curtains of a window. See how her hair grows thick on her little head, and how it

curls in great rings. My lady, her poor mother, was once a beauty, but she was no such beauty as this one will be, for she has her father's long limbs and fine shoulders, and the will to make every man look her way."

"Yes," said the housekeeper, who was an elderly woman, "there will be doings--there will be doings when she is a ripe young maid. She will take her way, and God grant she mayn't be too like her father and follow his."

It was true that she had no resemblance to her plain sisters, and bore no likeness to them in character. The two elder children, Anne and Barbara, were too meek-spirited to be troublesome; but during Clorinda's infancy Mistress Margery Wimpole watched her rapid growth with fear and qualms. She dare not reprove the servants who were ruining her by their treatment, and whose manners were forming her own. Sir Jeoffry's servants were no more moral than their master, and being brought up as she was among them, their young mistress became strangely familiar with many sights and sounds it is not the fortune of most young misses of breeding to see and hear. The cooks and kitchen-wenches were flighty with the grooms and men-servants, and little Mistress Clorinda, having a passion for horses and dogs, spent many an hour in the stables with the women who, for reasons of their own, were pleased enough to take her there as an excuse for seeking amusement for themselves. She played in the kennels and among the horses' heels, and learned to use oaths as roundly as any Giles or Tom whose work was to wield the curry comb. It was indeed a curious thing to hear her red baby mouth pour forth curses

and unseemly words as she would at any one who crossed her. Her temper and hot-headedness carried all before them, and the grooms and stable-boys found great sport in the language my young lady used in her innocent furies. But balk her in a whim, and she would pour forth the eloquence of a fish-wife or a lady of easy virtue in a pot-house quarrel. There was no human creature near her who had mind or heart enough to see the awfulness of her condition, or to strive to teach her to check her passions; and in the midst of these perilous surroundings the little virago grew handsomer and of finer carriage every hour, as if on the rank diet that fed her she throve and flourished.

There came a day at last when she had reached six years old, when by a trick of chance a turn was given to the wheel of her fate.

She had not reached three when a groom first set her on a horse's back and led her about the stable-yard, and she had so delighted in her exalted position, and had so shouted for pleasure and clutched her steed's rein and clucked at him, that her audience had looked on with roars of laughter. From that time she would be put up every day, and as time went on showed such unchildish courage and spirit that she furnished to her servant companions a new pastime. Soon she would not be held on, but riding astride like a boy, would sit up as straight as a man and swear at her horse, beating him with her heels and little fists if his pace did not suit her. She knew no fear, and would have used a whip so readily that the men did not dare to trust her with one, and knew they must not mount her on a steed too mettlesome. By the time she passed her

sixth birthday she could ride as well as a grown man, and was as familiar with her father's horses as he himself, though he knew nothing of the matter, it being always contrived that she should be out of sight when he visited his hunters.

It so chanced that the horse he rode the oftenest was her favourite, and many were the tempests of rage she fell into when she went to the stable to play with the animal and did not find him in his stall, because his master had ordered him out. At such times she would storm at the men in the stable-yard and call them ill names for their impudence in letting the beast go, which would cause them great merriment, as she knew nothing of who the man was who had balked her, since she was, in truth, not so much as conscious of her father's existence, never having seen or even heard more of him than his name, which she in no manner connected with herself.

"Could Sir Jeffry himself but once see and hear her when she storms at us and him, because he dares to ride his own beast," one of the older men said once, in the midst of their laughter, "I swear he would burst forth laughing and be taken with her impudent spirit, her temper is so like his own. She is his own flesh and blood, and as full of hell-fire as he."

Upon this morning which proved eventful to her, she had gone to the stables, as was her daily custom, and going into the stall where the big black horse was wont to stand, she found it empty. Her spirit rose hot

within her in the moment. She clenched her fists, and began to stamp and swear in such a manner as it would be scarce fitting to record.

"Where is he now?" she cried. "He is my own horse, and shall not be ridden. Who is the man who takes him? Who? Who?"

"'Tis a fellow who hath no manners," said the man she stormed at, grinning and thrusting his tongue in his cheek. "He says 'tis his beast, and not yours, and he will have him when he chooses."

"'Tis not his--'tis mine!" shrieked Miss, her little face inflamed with passion. "I will kill him! 'Tis my horse. He shall be mine!"

For a while the men tormented her, to hear her rave and see her passion, for, in truth, the greater tempest she was in, the better she was worth beholding, having a colour so rich, and eyes so great and black and flaming. At such times there was naught of the feminine in her, and indeed always she looked more like a handsome boy than a girl, her growth being for her age extraordinary. At length a lad who was a helper said to mock her--

"The man hath him at the door before the great steps now. I saw him stand there waiting but a moment ago. The man hath gone in the house."

She turned and ran to find him. The front part of the house she barely knew the outside of, as she was kept safely in the west wing and below

stairs, and when taken out for the air was always led privately by a side way--never passing through the great hall, where her father might chance to encounter her.

She knew best this side-entrance, and made her way to it, meaning to search until she found the front. She got into the house, and her spirit being roused, marched boldly through corridors and into rooms she had never seen before, and being so mere a child, notwithstanding her strange wilfulness and daring, the novelty of the things she saw so far distracted her mind from the cause of her anger that she stopped more than once to stare up at a portrait on a wall, or to take in her hand something she was curious concerning.

When she at last reached the entrance-hall, coming into it through a door she pushed open, using all her childish strength, she stood in the midst of it and gazed about her with a new curiosity and pleasure. It was a fine place, with antlers, and arms, and foxes' brushes hung upon the walls, and with carved panels of black oak, and oaken floor and furnishings. All in it was disorderly and showed rough usage; but once it had been a notable feature of the house, and well worth better care than had been bestowed upon it. She discovered on the walls many trophies that attracted her, but these she could not reach, and could only gaze and wonder at; but on an old oaken settle she found some things she could lay hands on, and forthwith seized and sat down upon the floor to play with them. One of them was a hunting-crop, which she brandished grandly, until she was more taken with a powder-flask which it so

happened her father, Sir Jeoffry, had lain down but a few minutes before, in passing through. He was going forth coursing, and had stepped into the dining-hall to toss off a bumper of brandy.

When he had helped himself from the buffet, and came back in haste, the first thing he clapped eyes on was his offspring pouring forth the powder from his flask upon the oaken floor. He had never seen her since that first occasion after the unfortunate incident of her birth, and beholding a child wasting his good powder at the moment he most wanted it and had no time to spare, and also not having had it recalled to his mind for years that he was a parent, except when he found himself forced reluctantly to pay for some small need, he beheld in the young offender only some impudent servant's brat, who had strayed into his domain and applied itself at once to mischief.

He sprang upon her, and seizing her by the arm, whirled her to her feet with no little violence, snatching the powder-flask from her, and dealing her a sound box on the ear.

"Blood and damnation on thee, thou impudent little baggage!" he shouted. "I'll break thy neck for thee, little scurvy beast;" and pulled the bell as he were like to break the wire.

But he had reckoned falsely on what he dealt with. Miss uttered a shriek of rage which rang through the roof like a clarion. She snatched the crop from the floor, rushed at him, and fell upon him like a thousand

little devils, beating his big legs with all the strength of her passion, and pouring forth oaths such as would have done credit to Doll Lightfoot herself.

"Damn thee!--damn thee!"--she roared and screamed, flogging him. "I'll tear thy eyes out! I'll cut thy liver from thee! Damn thy soul to hell!"

And this choice volley was with such spirit and fury poured forth, that Sir Jeoffry let his hand drop from the bell, fell into a great burst of laughter, and stood thus roaring while she beat him and shrieked and stormed.

The servants, hearing the jangled bell, attracted by the tumult, and of a sudden missing Mistress Clorinda, ran in consternation to the hall, and there beheld this truly pretty sight--Miss beating her father's legs, and tearing at him tooth and nail, while he stood shouting with laughter as if he would split his sides.

"Who is the little cockatrice?" he cried, the tears streaming down his florid cheeks. "Who is the young she-devil? Ods bodikins, who is she?"

For a second or so the servants stared at each other aghast, not knowing what to say, or venturing to utter a word; and then the nurse, who had come up panting, dared to gasp forth the truth.

"'Tis Mistress Clorinda, Sir Jeffry," she stammered--"my lady's last infant--the one of whom she died in childbed."

His big laugh broke in two, as one might say. He looked down at the young fury and stared. She was out of breath with beating him, and had ceased and fallen back apace, and was staring up at him also, breathing defiance and hatred. Her big black eyes were flames, her head was thrown up and back, her cheeks were blood scarlet, and her great crop of crow-black hair stood out about her beauteous, wicked little virago face, as if it might change into Medusa's snakes.

"Damn thee!" she shrieked at him again. "I'll kill thee, devil!"

Sir Jeffry broke into his big laugh afresh.

"Clorinda do they call thee, wench?" he said. "Jeffry thou shouldst have been but for thy mother's folly. A fiercer little devil for thy size I never saw--nor a handsomer one."

And he seized her from where she stood, and held her at his big arms' length, gazing at her uncanny beauty with looks that took her in from head to foot.