

CHAPTER III--Wherein Sir Jeffry's boon companions drink a toast

Her beauty of face, her fine body, her strength of limb, and great growth for her age, would have pleased him if she had possessed no other attraction, but the daring of her fury and her stable-boy breeding so amused him and suited his roystering tastes that he took to her as the finest plaything in the world.

He set her on the floor, forgetting his coursing, and would have made friends with her, but at first she would have none of him, and scowled at him in spite of all he did. The brandy by this time had mounted to his head and put him in the mood for frolic, liquor oftenest making him gamesome. He felt as if he were playing with a young dog or marking the spirit of a little fighting cock. He ordered the servants back to their kitchen, who stole away, the women amazed, and the men concealing grins which burst forth into guffaws of laughter when they came into their hall below.

"'Tis as we said," they chuckled. "He had but to see her beauty and find her a bigger devil than he, and 'twas done. The mettle of her--damning and flogging him! Never was there a finer sight! She feared him no more than if he had been a spaniel--and he roaring and laughing till he was like to burst."

"Dost know who I am?" Sir Jeffry was asking the child, grinning himself

as he stood before her where she sat on the oaken settle on which he had lifted her.

"No," quoth little Mistress, her black brows drawn down, her handsome owl's eyes verily seeming to look him through and through in search of somewhat; for, in sooth, her rage abating before his jovial humour, the big burly laughter attracted her attention, though she was not disposed to show him that she leaned towards any favour or yielding.

"I am thy Dad," he said. "'Twas thy Dad thou gavest such a trouncing. And thou hast an arm, too. Let's cast an eye on it."

He took her wrist and pushed up her sleeve, but she dragged back.

"Will not be mauled," she cried. "Get away from me!"

He shouted with laughter again. He had seen that the little arm was as white and hard as marble, and had such muscles as a great boy might have been a braggart about.

"By Gad!" he said, elated. "What a wench of six years old. Wilt have my crop and trounce thy Dad again!"

He picked up the crop from the place where she had thrown it, and forthwith gave it in her hand. She took it, but was no more in the humour to beat him, and as she looked still frowning from him to the

whip, the latter brought back to her mind the horse she had set out in search of.

"Where is my horse?" she said, and 'twas in the tone of an imperial demand. "Where is he?"

"Thy horse!" he echoed. "Which is thy horse then?"

"Rake is my horse," she answered--"the big black one. The man took him again;" and she ripped out a few more oaths and unchaste expressions, threatening what she would do for the man in question; the which delighted him more than ever. "Rake is my horse," she ended. "None else shall ride him."

"None else?" cried he. "Thou canst not ride him, baggage!"

She looked at him with scornful majesty.

"Where is he?" she demanded. And the next instant hearing the beast's restless feet grinding into the gravel outside as he fretted at having been kept waiting so long, she remembered what the stable-boy had said of having seen her favourite standing before the door, and struggling and dropping from the settle, she ran to look out; whereupon having done so, she shouted in triumph.

"He is here!" she said. "I see him;" and went pell-mell down the stone

steps to his side.

Sir Jeffry followed her in haste. 'Twould not have been to his humour now to have her brains kicked out.

"Hey!" he called, as he hurried. "Keep away from his heels, thou little devil."

But she had run to the big beast's head with another shout, and caught him round his foreleg, laughing, and Rake bent his head down and nosed her in a fumbling caress, on which, the bridle coming within her reach, she seized it and held his head that she might pat him, to which familiarity the beast was plainly well accustomed.

"He is my horse," quoth she grandly when her father reached her. "He will not let Giles play so."

Sir Jeffry gazed and swelled with pleasure in her.

"Would have said 'twas a lie if I had not seen it," he said to himself.

"'Tis no girl this, I swear. I thought 'twas my horse," he said to her,

"but 'tis plain enough he is thine."

"Put me up!" said his new-found offspring.

"Hast rid him before?" Sir Jeffry asked, with some lingering misgiving.

"Tell thy Dad if thou hast rid him."

She gave him a look askance under her long fringed lids--a surly yet half-slyly relenting look, because she wanted to get her way of him, and had the cunning wit and shrewdness of a child witch.

"Ay!" quoth she. "Put me up--Dad!"

He was not a man of quick mind, his brain having been too many years bemuddled with drink, but he had a rough instinct which showed him all the wondrous shrewdness of her casting that last word at him to wheedle him, even though she looked sullen in the saying it. It made him roar again for very exultation.

"Put me up, Dad!" he cried. "That will I--and see what thou wilt do."

He lifted her, she springing as he set his hands beneath her arms, and flinging her legs over astride across the saddle when she reached it. She was all fire and excitement, and caught the reins like an old huntsman, and with such a grasp as was amazing. She sat up with a straight, strong back, her whole face glowing and sparkling with exultant joy. Rake seemed to answer to her excited little laugh almost as much as to her hand. It seemed to wake his spirit and put him in good-humour. He started off with her down the avenue at a light, spirited trot, while she, clinging with her little legs and sitting firm and fearless, made him change into canter and gallop, having actually learned all his paces

like a lesson, and knowing his mouth as did his groom, who was her familiar and slave. Had she been of the build ordinary with children of her age, she could not have stayed upon his back; but she sat him like a child jockey, and Sir Jeoffry, watching and following her, clapped his hands boisterously and hallooed for joy.

"Lord, Lord!" he said. "There's not a man in the shire has such another little devil--and Rake, 'her horse,'" grinning--"and she to ride him so. I love thee, wench--hang me if I do not!"

She made him play with her and with Rake for a good hour, and then took him back to the stables, and there ordered him about finely among the dogs and horses, perceiving that somehow this great man she had got hold of was a creature who was in power and could be made use of.

When they returned to the house, he had her to eat her mid-day meal with him, when she called for ale, and drank it, and did good trencher duty, making him the while roar with laughter at her impudent child-talk.

"Never have I so split my sides since I was twenty," he said. "It makes me young again to roar so. She shall not leave my sight, since by chance I have found her. 'Tis too good a joke to lose, when times are dull, as they get to be as a man's years go on."

He sent for her woman and laid strange new commands on her.

"Where hath she hitherto been kept?" he asked.

"In the west wing, where are the nurseries, and where Mistress Wimpole abides with Mistress Barbara and Mistress Anne," the woman answered, with a frightened curtsy.

"Henceforth she shall live in this part of the house where I do," he said. "Make ready the chambers that were my lady's, and prepare to stay there with her."

From that hour the child's fate was sealed. He made himself her playfellow, and romped with and indulged her until she became fonder of him than of any groom or stable-boy she had been companions with before. But, indeed, she had never been given to bestowing much affection on those around her, seeming to feel herself too high a personage to show softness. The ones she showed most favour to were those who served her best; and even to them it was always favour she showed, not tenderness. Certain dogs and horses she was fond of, Rake coming nearest to her heart, and the place her father won in her affections was somewhat like to Rake's. She made him her servant and tyrannised over him, but at the same time followed and imitated him as if she had been a young spaniel he was training. The life the child led, it would have broken a motherly woman's heart to hear about; but there was no good woman near her, her mother's relatives, and even Sir Jeffry's own, having cut themselves off early from them--Wildairs Hall and its master being no great credit to

those having the misfortune to be connected with them. The neighbouring gentry had gradually ceased to visit the family some time before her ladyship's death, and since then the only guests who frequented the place were a circle of hunting, drinking, and guzzling boon companions of Sir Jeffrey's own, who joined him in all his carousals and debaucheries.

To these he announced his discovery of his daughter with tumultuous delight. He told them, amid storms of laughter, of his first encounter with her; of her flogging him with his own crop, and cursing him like a trooper; of her claiming Rake as her own horse, and swearing at the man who had dared to take him from the stable to ride; and of her sitting him like an infant jockey, and seeming, by some strange power, to have mastered him as no other had been able heretofore to do. Then he had her brought into the dining-room, where they sat over their bottles drinking deep, and setting her on the table, he exhibited her to them, boasting of her beauty, showing them her splendid arm and leg and thigh, measuring her height, and exciting her to test the strength of the grip of her hand and the power of her little fist.

"Saw you ever a wench like her?" he cried, as they all shouted with laughter and made jokes not too polite, but such as were of the sole kind they were given to. "Has any man among you begot a boy as big and handsome? Hang me! if she would not knock down any lad of ten if she were in a fury."

"We wild dogs are out of favour with the women," cried one of the best

pleased among them, a certain Lord Eldershaw, whose seat was a few miles from Wildairs Hall--"women like nincompoops and chaplains. Let us take this one for our toast, and bring her up as girls should be brought up to be companions for men. I give you, Mistress Clorinda Wildairs--Mistress Clorinda, the enslaver of six years old--bumpers, lads!--bumpers!"

And they set her in the very midst of the big table and drank her health, standing, bursting into a jovial, ribald song; and the child, excited by the noise and laughter, actually broke forth and joined them in a high, strong treble, the song being one she was quite familiar with, having heard it often enough in the stable to have learned the words pat.

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Two weeks after his meeting with her, Sir Jeffry was seized with the whim to go up to London and set her forth with finery. 'Twas but rarely he went up to town, having neither money to waste, nor finding great attraction in the more civilised quarters of the world. He brought her back such clothes as for richness and odd, unsuitable fashion child never wore before. There were brocades that stood alone with splendour of fabric, there was rich lace, fine linen, ribbands, farthingales, swansdown tippetts, and little slippers with high red heels. He had a wardrobe made for her such as the finest lady of fashion could scarcely boast, and the tiny creature was decked out in it, and on great occasions even strung with her dead mother's jewels.

Among these strange things, he had the fantastical notion to have made for her several suits of boy's clothes: pink and blue satin coats, little white, or amber, or blue satin breeches, ruffles of lace, and waistcoats embroidered with colours and silver or gold. There was also a small scarlet-coated hunting costume and all the paraphernalia of the chase. It was Sir Jeffry's finest joke to bid her woman dress her as a boy, and then he would have her brought to the table where he and his fellows were dining together, and she would toss off her little bumper with the best of them, and rip out childish oaths, and sing them, to their delight, songs she had learned from the stable-boys. She cared more for dogs and horses than for finery, and when she was not in the humour to be made a puppet of, neither tirewoman nor devil could put her into her brocades; but she liked the excitement of the dining-room, and, as time went on, would be dressed in her flowered petticoats in a passion of eagerness to go and show herself, and coquet in her lace and gewgaws with men old enough to be her father, and loose enough to find her premature airs and graces a fine joke indeed. She ruled them all with her temper and her shrewish will. She would have her way in all things, or there should be no sport with her, and she would sing no songs for them, but would flout them bitterly, and sit in a great chair with her black brows drawn down, and her whole small person breathing rancour and disdain.

Sir Jeffry, who had bullied his wife, had now the pleasurable experience of being henpecked by his daughter; for so, indeed, he was. Miss ruled him with a rod of iron, and wielded her weapon with such skill that before a year had elapsed he obeyed her as the servants below stairs had

done in her infancy. She had no fear of his great oaths, for she possessed a strangely varied stock of her own upon which she could always draw, and her voice being more shrill than his, if not of such bigness, her ear-piercing shrieks and indomitable perseverance always proved too much for him in the end. It must be admitted likewise that her violence of temper and power of will were somewhat beyond his own, notwithstanding

her tender years and his reputation. In fact, he found himself obliged to observe this, and finally made something of a merit and joke of it.

"There is no managing of the little shrew," he would say. "Neither man nor devil can bend or break her. If I smashed every bone in her carcass, she would die shrieking hell at me and defiance."

If one admits the truth, it must be owned that if she had not had bestowed upon her by nature gifts of beauty and vivacity so extraordinary, and had been cursed with a thousandth part of the vixenishness she displayed every day of her life, he would have broken every bone in her carcass without a scruple or a qualm. But her beauty seemed but to grow with every hour that passed, and it was by exceeding good fortune exactly the fashion of beauty which he admired the most. When she attained her tenth year she was as tall as a fine boy of twelve, and of such a shape and carriage as young Diana herself might have envied. Her limbs were long, and most divinely moulded, and of a strength that caused admiration and amazement in all beholders. Her father taught her to follow him in the hunting-field, and when she

appeared upon her horse, clad in her little breeches and top-boots and scarlet coat, child though she was, she set the field on fire. She learned full early how to coquet and roll her fine eyes; but it is also true that she was not much of a languisher, as all her ogling was of a destructive or proudly-attacking kind. It was her habit to leave others to languish, and herself to lead them with disdainful vivacity to doing so. She was the talk, and, it must be admitted, the scandal, of the county by the day she was fifteen. The part wherein she lived was a boisterous hunting shire where there were wide ditches and high hedges to leap, and rough hills and moors to gallop over, and within the region neither polite life nor polite education were much thought of; but even in the worst portions of it there were occasional virtuous matrons who shook their heads with much gravity and wonder over the beautiful Mistress Clorinda.