

CHAPTER IV--Lord Twemlow's chaplain visits his patron's kinsman, and
Mistress Clorinda shines on her birthday night

Uncivilised and almost savage as her girlish life was, and unregulated by any outward training as was her mind, there were none who came in contact with her who could be blind to a certain strong, clear wit, and unconquerableness of purpose, for which she was remarkable. She ever knew full well what she desired to gain or to avoid, and once having fixed her mind upon any object, she showed an adroitness and brilliancy of resource, a control of herself and others, the which there was no circumventing. She never made a blunder because she could not control the expression of her emotions; and when she gave way to a passion, 'twas because she chose to do so, having naught to lose, and in the midst of all their riotous jesting with her the boon companions of Sir Jeoffry knew this.

"Had she a secret to keep, child though she is," said Eldershaw, "there is none--man or woman--who could scare or surprise it from her; and 'tis a strange quality to note so early in a female creature."

She spent her days with her father and his dissolute friends, treated half like a boy, half a fantastical queen, until she was fourteen. She hunted and coursed, shot birds, leaped hedges and ditches, reigned at the riotous feastings, and coquetted with these mature, and in some cases elderly, men, as if she looked forward to doing naught else all her life.

But one day, after she had gone out hunting with her father, riding Rake, who had been given to her, and wearing her scarlet coat, breeches, and top-boots, one of the few remaining members of her mother's family sent his chaplain to remonstrate and advise her father to command her to forbear from appearing in such impudent attire.

There was, indeed, a stirring scene when this message was delivered by its bearer. The chaplain was an awkward, timid creature, who had heard stories enough of Wildairs Hall and its master to undertake his mission with a quaking soul. To have refused to obey any behest of his patron would have cost him his living, and knowing this beyond a doubt, he was forced to gird up his loins and gather together all the little courage he could muster to beard the lion in his den.

The first thing he beheld on entering the big hall was a beautiful tall youth wearing his own rich black hair, and dressed in scarlet coat for hunting. He was playing with a dog, making it leap over his crop, and both laughing and swearing at its clumsiness. He glanced at the chaplain with a laughing, brilliant eye, returning the poor man's humble bow with a slight nod as he plainly hearkened to what he said as he explained his errand.

"I come from my Lord Twemlow, who is your master's kinsman," the chaplain

faltered; "I am bidden to see and speak to him if it be possible, and his

lordship much desires that Sir Jeffry will allow it to be so. My Lord Twemlow--"

The beautiful youth left his playing with the dog and came forward with all the air of the young master of the house.

"My Lord Twemlow sends you?" he said. "'Tis long since his lordship favoured us with messages. Where is Sir Jeffry, Lovatt?"

"In the dining-hall," answered the servant. "He went there but a moment past, Mistress."

The chaplain gave such a start as made him drop his shovel hat.

"Mistress!" And this was she--this fine young creature who was tall and grandly enough built and knit to seem a radiant being even when clad in masculine attire. He picked up his hat and bowed so low that it almost swept the floor in his obeisance. He was not used to female beauty which deigned to cast great smiling eyes upon him, for at my Lord Twemlow's table he sat so far below the salt that women looked not his way.

This beauty looked at him as if she was amused at the thought of something in her own mind. He wondered tremblingly if she guessed what he came for and knew how her father would receive it.

"Come with me," she said; "I will take you to him. He would not see you if I did not. He does not love his lordship tenderly enough."

She led the way, holding her head jauntily and high, while he cast down his eyes lest his gaze should be led to wander in a way unseemly in one of his cloth. Such a foot and such--! He felt it more becoming and safer to lift his eyes to the ceiling and keep them there, which gave him somewhat the aspect of one praying.

Sir Jeffry stood at the buffet with a flagon of ale in his hand, taking his stirrup cup. At the sight of a stranger and one attired in the garb of a chaplain, he scowled surprisedly.

"What's this?" quoth he. "What dost want, Clo? I have no leisure for a sermon."

Mistress Clorinda went to the buffet and filled a tankard for herself and carried it back to the table, on the edge of which she half sat, with one leg bent, one foot resting on the floor.

"Time thou wilt have to take, Dad," she said, with an arch grin, showing two rows of gleaming pearls. "This gentleman is my Lord Twemlow's chaplain, whom he sends to exhort you, requesting you to have the civility to hear him."

"Exhort be damned, and Twemlow be damned too!" cried Sir Jeffry, who had

a great quarrel with his lordship and hated him bitterly. "What does the

canting fool mean?"

"Sir," faltered the poor message-bearer, "his lordship hath--hath been concerned--having heard--"

The handsome creature balanced against the table took the tankard from her lips and laughed.

"Having heard thy daughter rides to field in breeches, and is an unseemly-behaving wench," she cried, "his lordship sends his chaplain to deliver a discourse thereon--not choosing to come himself. Is not that thy errand, reverend sir?"

The chaplain, poor man, turned pale, having caught, as she spoke, a glimpse of Sir Jeffry's reddening visage.

"Madam," he faltered, bowing--"Madam, I ask pardon of you most humbly! If it were your pleasure to deign to--to--allow me--"

She set the tankard on the table with a rollicking smack, and thrust her hands in her breeches-pockets, swaying with laughter; and, indeed, 'twas ringing music, her rich great laugh, which, when she grew of riper years, was much lauded and written verses on by her numerous swains.

"If 'twere my pleasure to go away and allow you to speak, free from the

awkwardness of a young lady's presence," she said. "But 'tis not, as it happens, and if I stay here, I shall be a protection."

In truth, he required one. Sir Jeffry broke into a torrent of blasphemy. He damned both kinsman and chaplain, and raged at the impudence of both in daring to approach him, swearing to horsewhip my lord if they ever met, and to have the chaplain kicked out of the house, and beyond the park gates themselves. But Mistress Clorinda chose to make it her whim to take it in better humour, and as a joke with a fine point to it. She laughed at her father's storming, and while the chaplain quailed before it with pallid countenance and fairly hang-dog look, she seemed to find it but a cause for outbursts of merriment.

"Hold thy tongue a bit, Dad," she cried, when he had reached his loudest, "and let his reverence tell us what his message is. We have not even heard it."

"Want not to hear it!" shouted Sir Jeffry. "Dost think I'll stand his impudence? Not I!"

"What was your message?" demanded the young lady of the chaplain. "You cannot return without delivering it. Tell it to me. I choose it shall be told."

The chaplain clutched and fumbled with his hat, pale, and dropping his eyes upon the floor, for very fear.

"Pluck up thy courage, man," said Clorinda. "I will uphold thee. The message?"

"Your pardon, Madam--'twas this," the chaplain faltered. "My lord commanded me to warn your honoured father--that if he did not beg you to leave off wearing--wearing--"

"Breeches," said Mistress Clorinda, slapping her knee.

The chaplain blushed with modesty, though he was a man of sallow countenance.

"No gentleman," he went on, going more lamely at each word--"notwithstanding your great beauty--no gentleman--"

"Would marry me?" the young lady ended for him, with merciful good-humour.

"For if you--if a young lady be permitted to bear herself in such a manner as will cause her to be held lightly, she can make no match that will not be a dishonour to her family--and--and--"

"And may do worse!" quoth Mistress Clo, and laughed until the room rang.

Sir Jeffry's rage was such as made him like to burst; but she restrained

him when he would have flung his tankard at the chaplain's head, and amid his storm of curses bundled the poor man out of the room, picking up his hat which in his hurry and fright he let fall, and thrusting it into his hand.

"Tell his lordship," she said, laughing still as she spoke the final words, "that I say he is right--and I will see to it that no disgrace befalls him."

"Forsooth, Dad," she said, returning, "perhaps the old son of a--"--something unmannerly--"is not so great a fool. As for me, I mean to make a fine marriage and be a great lady, and I know of none hereabouts to suit me but the old Earl of Dunstanwolde, and 'tis said he rates at all but modest women, and, in faith, he might not find breeches mannerly. I will not hunt in them again."

She did not, though once or twice when she was in a wild mood, and her father entertained at dinner those of his companions whom she was the most inclined to, she swaggered in among them in her daintiest suits of male attire, and caused their wine-shot eyes to gloat over her boyish-maiden charms and jaunty airs and graces.

On the night of her fifteenth birthday Sir Jeffry gave a great dinner to his boon companions and hers. She had herself commanded that there should be no ladies at the feast; for she chose to announce that she should appear at no more such, having the wit to see that she was too

tall a young lady for childish follies, and that she had now arrived at an age when her market must be made.

"I shall have women enough henceforth to be dull with," she said. "Thou art but a poor match-maker, Dad, or wouldst have thought of it for me. But not once has it come into thy pate that I have no mother to angle in my cause and teach me how to cast sheep's eyes at bachelors. Long-tailed petticoats from this time for me, and hoops and patches, and ogling over fans--until at last, if I play my cards well, some great lord will look my way and be taken by my shape and my manners."

"With thy shape, Clo, God knows every man will," laughed Sir Jeffry, "but I fear me not with thy manners. Thou hast the manners of a baggage, and they are second nature to thee."

"They are what I was born with," answered Mistress Clorinda. "They came from him that begot me, and he has not since improved them. But now"--making a great sweeping curtsy, her impudent bright beauty almost dazzling his eyes--"now, after my birth-night, they will be bettered; but this one night I will have my last fling."

When the men trooped into the black oak wainscotted dining-hall on the eventful night, they found their audacious young hostess awaiting them in greater and more daring beauty than they had ever before beheld. She wore knee-breeches of white satin, a pink satin coat embroidered with silver roses, white silk stockings, and shoes with great buckles of

brilliant, revealing a leg so round and strong and delicately moulded, and a foot so arched and slender, as surely never before, they swore one and all, woman had had to display. She met them standing jauntily astride upon the hearth, her back to the fire, and she greeted each one as he came with some pretty impudence. Her hair was tied back and powdered, her black eyes were like lodestars, drawing all men, and her colour was that of a ripe pomegranate. She had a fine, haughty little Roman nose, a mouth like a scarlet bow, a wonderful long throat, and round cleft chin. A dazzling mien indeed she possessed, and ready enough she was to shine before them. Sir Jeffery was now elderly, having been a man of forty when united to his conjugal companion. Most of his friends were of his own age, so that it had not been with unripe youth Mistress Clorinda had been in the habit of consorting. But upon this night a newcomer was among the guests. He was a young relation of one of the older men, and having come to his kinsman's house upon a visit, and having proved himself, in spite of his youth, to be a young fellow of humour, high courage in the hunting-field, and by no means averse either to entering upon or discussing intrigue and gallant adventure, had made himself something of a favourite. His youthful beauty for a man almost equalled that of Mistress Clorinda herself. He had an elegant, fine shape, of great strength and vigour, his countenance was delicately ruddy and handsomely featured, his curling fair hair flowed loose upon his shoulders, and, though masculine in mould, his ankle was as slender and his buckled shoe as arched as her own.

He was, it is true, twenty-four years of age and a man, while she was but

fifteen and a woman, but being so tall and built with such unusual vigour of symmetry, she was a beauteous match for him, and both being attired in fashionable masculine habit, these two pretty young fellows standing smiling saucily at each other were a charming, though singular, spectacle.

This young man was already well known in the modish world of town for his beauty and adventurous spirit. He was indeed already a beau and conqueror of female hearts. It was suspected that he cherished a private ambition to set the modes in beauties and embroidered waistcoats himself in time, and be as renowned abroad and as much the town talk as certain other celebrated beaux had been before him. The art of ogling tenderly and of uttering soft nothings he had learned during his first season in town, and as he had a great melting blue eye, the figure of an Adonis, and a white and shapely hand for a ring, he was well equipped for conquest. He had darted many an inflaming glance at Mistress Clorinda before the first meats were removed. Even in London he had heard a vague rumour of this handsome young woman, bred among her father's dogs, horses, and boon companions, and ripening into a beauty likely to make town faces pale. He had almost fallen into the spleen on hearing that she had left her boy's clothes and vowed she would wear them no more, as above all things he had desired to see how she carried them and what charms they revealed. On hearing from his host and kinsman that she had said that on her birth-night she would bid them farewell for ever by donning them for the last time, he was consumed with eagerness to obtain an invitation. This his kinsman besought for him, and, behold! the first

glance the beauty shot at him pierced his inflammable bosom like a dart. Never before had it been his fortune to behold female charms so dazzling and eyes of such lustre and young majesty. The lovely baggage had a saucy way of standing with her white jewelled hands in her pockets like a pretty fop, and throwing up her little head like a modish beauty who was of royal blood; and these two tricks alone, he felt, might have set on fire the heart of a man years older and colder than himself.

If she had been of the order of soft-natured charmers, they would have fallen into each other's eyes before the wine was changed; but this Mistress Clorinda was not. She did not fear to meet the full battery of his enamoured glances, but she did not choose to return them. She played her part of the pretty young fellow who was a high-spirited beauty, with more of wit and fire than she had ever played it before. The rollicking hunting-squires, who had been her play-fellows so long, devoured her with their delighted glances and roared with laughter at her sallies. Their jokes and flatteries were not of the most seemly, but she had not been bred to seemliness and modesty, and was no more ignorant than if she had been, in sooth, some gay young springald of a lad. To her it was part of the entertainment that upon this last night they conducted themselves as beseemed her boyish masquerading. Though country-bred, she had lived among companions who were men of the world and lived without restraints, and she had so far learned from them that at fifteen years old she was as worldly and as familiar with the devices of intrigue as she would be at forty. So far she had not been pushed to practising them, her singular life having thrown her among few of her own age, and those had chanced to

be of a sort she disdainfully counted as country bumpkins.

But the young gallant introduced to-night into the world she lived in was no bumpkin, and was a dandy of the town. His name was Sir John Oxon, and

he had just come into his title and a pretty property. His hands were as white and bejewelled as her own, his habit was of the latest fashionable cut, and his fair flowing locks scattered a delicate French perfume she did not even know the name of.

But though she observed all these attractions and found them powerful, young Sir John remarked, with a slight sinking qualm, that her great eye did not fall before his amorous glances, but met them with high smiling readiness, and her colour never blanched or heightened a whit for all their masterly skilfulness. But he had sworn to himself that he would approach close enough to her to fire off some fine speech before the night was ended, and he endeavoured to bear himself with at least an outward air of patience until he beheld his opportunity.

When the last dish was removed and bottles and bumpers stood upon the board, she sprang up on her chair and stood before them all, smiling down the long table with eyes like flashing jewels. Her hands were thrust in her pockets--with her pretty young fop's air, and she drew herself to her full comely height, her beauteous lithe limbs and slender feet set smartly together. Twenty pairs of masculine eyes were turned upon her beauty, but none so ardently as the young one's across the table.

"Look your last on my fine shape," she proclaimed in her high, rich voice. "You will see but little of the lower part of it when it is hid in farthingales and petticoats. Look your last before I go to don my fine lady's furbelows."

And when they filled their glasses and lifted them and shouted admiring jests to her, she broke into one of her stable-boy songs, and sang it in the voice of a skylark.

No man among them was used to showing her the courtesies of polite breeding. She had been too long a boy to them for that to have entered any mind, and when she finished her song, sprang down, and made for the door, Sir John beheld his long-looked-for chance, and was there before her to open it with a great bow, made with his hand upon his heart and his fair locks falling.

"You rob us of the rapture of beholding great beauties, Madam," he said in a low, impassioned voice. "But there should be indeed but one happy man whose bliss it is to gaze upon such perfections."

"I am fifteen years old to-night," she answered; "and as yet I have not set eyes upon him."

"How do you know that, madam?" he said, bowing lower still.

She laughed her great rich laugh.

"Forsooth, I do not know," she retorted. "He may be here this very night among this company; and as it might be so, I go to don my modesty."

And she bestowed on him a parting shot in the shape of one of her prettiest young fop waves of the hand, and was gone from him.

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When the door closed behind her and Sir John Oxon returned to the table, for a while a sort of dulness fell upon the party. Not being of quick minds or sentiments, these country roisterers failed to understand the heavy cloud of spleen and lack of spirit they experienced, and as they filled their glasses and tossed off one bumper after another to cure it, they soon began again to laugh and fell into boisterous joking.

They talked mostly, indeed, of their young playfellow, of whom they felt, in some indistinct manner, they were to be bereft; they rallied Sir Jeffry, told stories of her childhood and made pictures of her budding beauties, comparing them with those of young ladies who were celebrated toasts.

"She will sail among them like a royal frigate," said one; "and they will pale before her lustre as a tallow dip does before an illumination."

The clock struck twelve before she returned to them. Just as the last stroke sounded the door was thrown open, and there she stood, a woman on each side of her, holding a large silver candelabra bright with wax tapers high above her, so that she was in a flood of light.

She was attired in rich brocade of crimson and silver, and wore a great hooped petticoat, which showed off her grandeur, her waist of no more bigness than a man's hands could clasp, set in its midst like the stem of a flower; her black hair was rolled high and circled with jewels, her fair long throat blazed with a collar of diamonds, and the majesty of her eye and lip and brow made up a mien so dazzling that every man sprang to his feet beholding her.

She made a sweeping obeisance and then stood up before them, her head thrown back and her lips curving in the triumphant mocking smile of a great beauty looking upon them all as vassals.

"Down upon your knees," she cried, "and drink to me kneeling. From this night all men must bend so--all men on whom I deign to cast my eyes."