

CHAPTER V--"Not I," said she. "There thou mayst trust me. I would not be found out."

She went no more a-hunting in boy's clothes, but from this time forward wore brocades and paduasoyes, fine lawn and lace. Her tirewoman was kept so busily engaged upon making rich habits, fragrant waters and essences, and so running at her bidding to change her gown or dress her head in some new fashion, that her life was made to her a weighty burden to bear, and also a painful one. Her place had before been an easy one but for her mistress's choleric temper, but it was so no more. Never had young lady been so exacting and so tempestuous when not pleased with the adorning of her face and shape. In the presence of polite strangers, whether ladies or gentlemen, Mistress Clorinda in these days chose to chasten her language and give less rein to her fantastical passions, but alone in her closet with her woman, if a riband did but not suit her fancy, or a hoop not please, she did not fear to be as scurrilous as she chose. In this discreet retirement she rapped out oaths and boxed her woman's ears with a vigorous hand, tore off her gowns and stamped them beneath her feet, or flung pots of pomade at the poor woman's head. She took these freedoms with such a readiness and spirit that she was served with a despatch and humbleness scarcely to be equalled, and, it is certain, never excelled.

The high courage and undaunted will which had been the engines she had used to gain her will from her infant years aided her in these days to

carry out what her keen mind and woman's wit had designed, which was to take the county by storm with her beauty, and reign toast and enslaver until such time as she won the prize of a husband of rich estates and notable rank.

It was soon bruited abroad, to the amazement of the county, that Mistress Clorinda Wildairs had changed her strange and unseemly habits of life, and had become as much a young lady of fashion and breeding as her birth and charm demanded. This was first made known by her appearing one Sunday morning at church, accompanied--as though attended with a retinue of servitors--by Mistress Wimpole and her two sisters, whose plain faces, awkward shape, and still more awkward attire were such a foil to her glowing loveliness as set it in high relief. It was seldom that the coach from Wildairs Hall drew up before the lych-gate, but upon rare Sunday mornings Mistress Wimpole and her two charges contrived, if Sir Jeffrey was not in an ill-humour and the coachman was complaisant, to be driven to service. Usually, however, they trudged afoot, and, if the day chanced to be sultry, arrived with their snub-nosed faces of a high and shiny colour, or if the country roads were wet, with their petticoats bemired.

This morning, when the coach drew up, the horses were well groomed, the coachman smartly dressed, and a footman was in attendance, who sprang to earth and opened the door with a flourish.

The loiterers in the churchyard, and those who were approaching the gate or passing towards the church porch, stared with eyes wide stretched in wonder and incredulity. Never had such a thing before been beheld or heard of as what they now saw in broad daylight.

Mistress Clorinda, clad in highest town fashion, in brocades and silver lace and splendid furbelows, stepped forth from the chariot with the air of a queen. She had the majestic composure of a young lady who had worn nothing less modish than such raiment all her life, and who had prayed decorously beneath her neighbours' eyes since she had left her nurse's care.

Her sisters and their governess looked timorous, and as if they knew not where to cast their eyes for shamefacedness; but not so Mistress Clorinda, who moved forward with a stately, swimming gait, her fine head in the air. As she stepped into the porch a young gentleman drew back and made a profound obeisance to her. She cast her eyes upon him and returned it with a grace and condescension which struck the beholders dumb with admiring awe. To some of the people of a commoner sort he was a stranger, but all connected with the gentry knew he was Sir John Oxon, who was staying at Eldershawe Park with his relative, whose estate it was.

How Mistress Clorinda contrived to manage it no one was aware but herself, but after a few appearances at church she appeared at other places. She was seen at dinners at fine houses, and began to be seen at

routs and balls. Where she was seen she shone, and with such radiance as caused matchmaking matrons great dismay, and their daughters woeful qualms. Once having shone, she could not be extinguished or hidden under a bushel; for, being of rank and highly connected through mother as well as father, and playing her cards with great wit and skill, she could not be thrust aside.

At her first hunt ball she set aflame every male breast in the shire, unmasking such a battery of charms as no man could withstand the fire of. Her dazzling eye, her wondrous shape, the rich music of her laugh, and the mocking wit of her sharp saucy tongue were weapons to have armed a dozen women, and she was but one, and in the first rich tempting glow of blooming youth.

She turned more heads and caused more quarrels than she could have counted had she sat up half the night. She went to her coach with her father followed by a dozen gallants, each ready to spit the other for a smile. Her smiles were wondrous, but there seemed always a touch of mockery or disdain in them which made them more remembered than if they had been softer.

One man there was, who perchance found something in her high glance not wholly scornful, but he was used to soft treatment from women, and had, in sooth, expected milder glances than were bestowed upon him. This was young Sir John Oxon, who had found himself among the fair sex that night

as great a beau as she had been a belle; but two dances he had won from her, and this was more than any other man could boast, and what other gallants envied him with darkest hatred.

Sir Jeoffry, who had watched her as she queened it amongst rakes and fops and honest country squires and knights, had marked the vigour with which they plied her with an emotion which was a new sensation to his drink-bemuddled brain. So far as it was in his nature to love another than himself, he had learned to love this young lovely virago of his own flesh and blood, perchance because she was the only creature who had never quailed before him, and had always known how to bend him to her will.

When the chariot rode away, he looked at her as she sat erect in the early morning light, as unblenching, bright, and untouched in bloom as if she had that moment risen from her pillow and washed her face in dew. He was not so drunk as he had been at midnight, but he was a little maudlin.

"By God, thou art handsome, Clo!" he said. "By God, I never saw a finer woman!"

"Nor I," she answered back, "which I thank Heaven for."

"Thou pretty, brazen baggage," her father laughed. "Old Dunstanwolde looked thee well over to-night. He never looked away from the moment he clapped eyes on thee."

"That I knew better than thee, Dad," said the beauty; "and I saw that he could not have done it if he had tried. If there comes no richer, younger great gentleman, he shall marry me."

"Thou hast a sharp eye and a keen wit," said Sir Jeffry, looking askance at her with a new maggot in his brain. "Wouldst never play the fool, I warrant. They will press thee hard and 'twill be hard to withstand their love-making, but I shall never have to mount and ride off with pistols in my holsters to bring back a man and make him marry thee, as Chris Crowell had to do for his youngest wench. Thou wouldst never play the fool, I warrant--wouldst thou, Clo?"

She tossed her head and laughed like a young scornful devil, showing her white pearl teeth between her lips' scarlet.

"Not I," she said. "There thou mayst trust me. I would not be found out."

She played her part as triumphant beauty so successfully that the cleverest managing mother in the universe could not have bettered her position. Gallants brawled for her; honest men fell at her feet; romantic swains wrote verses to her, praising her eyes, her delicate bosom, the carnation of her cheek, and the awful majesty of her mien. In every revel she was queen, in every contest of beauties Venus, in every spectacle of triumph empress of them all.

The Earl of Dunstanwolde, who had the oldest name and the richest estates in his own county and the six adjoining ones, who, having made a love-match in his prime, and lost wife and heir but a year after his nuptials, had been the despair of every maid and mother who knew him, because he would not be melted to a marriageable mood. After the hunt ball this mourning nobleman, who was by this time of ripe years, had appeared in the world again as he had not done for many years. Before many months had elapsed, it was known that his admiration of the new beauty was confessed, and it was believed that he but waited further knowledge of her to advance to the point of laying his title and estates at her feet.

But though, two years before, the entire county would have rated low indeed the wit and foresight of the man who had even hinted the possibility of such honour and good fortune being in prospect for the young lady, so great was Mistress Clorinda's brilliant and noble beauty, and with such majesty she bore herself in these times, that there were even those who doubted whether she would think my lord a rich enough prize for her, and if, when he fell upon his knees, she would deign to become his countess, feeling that she had such splendid wares to dispose of as might be bartered for a duke, when she went to town and to court.

During the length of more than one man's lifetime after, the reign of Mistress Clorinda Wildairs was a memory recalled over the bottle at the dining-table among men, some of whom had but heard their fathers vaunt her beauties. It seemed as if in her person there was not a single flaw,

or indeed a charm, which had not reached the highest point of beauty. For shape she might have vied with young Diana, mounted side by side with her upon a pedestal; her raven locks were of a length and luxuriance to clothe her as a garment, her great eye commanded and flashed as Juno's might have done in the goddess's divinest moments of lovely pride, and though it was said none ever saw it languish, each man who adored her was maddened by the secret belief that Venus' self could not so melt in love as she if she would stoop to loving--as each one prayed she might--himself. Her hands and feet, her neck, the slimness of her waist, her mantling crimson and ivory white, her little ear, her scarlet lip, the pearls between them and her long white throat, were perfection each and all, and catalogued with oaths of rapture.

"She hath such beauties," one admirer said, "that a man must toast them all and cannot drink to her as to a single woman. And she hath so many that to slight none her servant must go from the table reeling."

There was but one thing connected with her which was not a weapon to her hand, and this was, that she was not a fortune. Sir Jeffry had drunk and rioted until he had but little left. He had cut his timber and let his estate go to rack, having, indeed, no money to keep it up. The great Hall, which had once been a fine old place, was almost a ruin. Its carved oak and noble rooms and galleries were all of its past splendours that remained. All had been sold that could be sold, and all the outcome had been spent. The county, indeed, wondered where Mistress Clorinda's fine clothes came from, and knew full well why she was not taken to court

to kneel to the Queen. That she was waiting for this to make her match, the envious were quite sure, and did not hesitate to whisper pretty loudly.

The name of one man of rank and fortune after another was spoken of as that of a suitor to her hand, but in some way it was discovered that she refused them all. It was also known that they continued to worship her, and that at any moment she could call even the best among them back. It seemed that, while all the men were enamoured of her, there was not one who could cure himself of his passion, however hopeless it might be.

Her wit was as great as her beauty, and she had a spirit before which no man could stand if she chose to be disdainful. To some she was so, and had the whim to flout them with great brilliancy. Encounters with her were always remembered, and if heard by those not concerned, were considered worthy both of recollection and of being repeated to the world; she had a tongue so nimble and a wit so full of fire.

Young Sir John Oxon's visit to his relative at Eldershawe being at an end, he returned to town, and remaining there through a few weeks of fashionable gaiety, won new reputations as a triumpher over the female heart. He made some renowned conquests and set the mode in some new essences and sword-knots. But even these triumphs appeared to pall upon him shortly, since he deserted the town and returned again to the country, where, on this occasion, he did not stay with his relative, but with Sir Jeffry himself, who had taken a boisterous fancy to him.

It had been much marked since the altered life of Mistress Clorinda that she, who had previously defied all rules laid down on behaviour for young ladies, and had been thought to do so because she knew none of them, now proved that her wild fashion had been but wilfulness, since it was seen that she must have observed and marked manners with the best. There seemed no decorum she did not know how to observe with the most natural grace. It was, indeed, all grace and majesty, there being no suggestion of the prude about her, but rather the manner of a young lady having been born with pride and stateliness, and most carefully bred. This was the result of her wondrous wit, the highness of her talents, and the strength of her will, which was of such power that she could carry out without fail anything she chose to undertake. There are some women who have beauty, and some who have wit or vigour of understanding, but she possessed all three, and with them such courage and strength of nerve as would have well equipped a man.

Quick as her wit was and ready as were her brilliant quips and sallies, there was no levity in her demeanour, and she kept Mistress Margery Wimpole in discreet attendance upon her, as if she had been the daughter of a Spanish Hidalgo, never to be approached except in the presence of her duenna. Poor Mistress Margery, finding her old fears removed, was overpowered with new ones. She had no lawlessness or hoyden manners to contend with, but instead a haughtiness so high and demands so great that her powers could scarcely satisfy the one or her spirit stand up before the other.

"It is as if one were lady-in-waiting to her Majesty's self," she used to whimper when she was alone and dare do so. "Surely the Queen has not such a will and such a temper. She will have me toil to look worthy of her in my habit, and bear myself like a duchess in dignity. Alack! I have practised my obeisance by the hour to perfect it, so that I may escape her wrath. And I must know how to look, and when and where to sit, and with what air of being near at hand, while I must see nothing! And I must drag my failing limbs hither and thither with genteel ease while I ache from head to foot, being neither young nor strong."

The poor lady was so overawed by, and yet so admired, her charge, that it was piteous to behold.

"She is an arrant fool," quoth Mistress Clorinda to her father. "A nice duenna she would be, forsooth, if she were with a woman who needed watching. She could be hoodwinked as it pleased me a dozen times a day. It is I who am her guard, not she mine! But a beauty must drag some spy about with her, it seems, and she I can make to obey me like a spaniel. We can afford no better, and she is well born, and since I bought her the purple paduasoy and the new lappets she has looked well enough to serve."

"Dunstanwolde need not fear for thee now," said Sir Jeffry. "Thou art a clever and foreseeing wench, Clo."

"Dunstanwolde nor any man!" she answered. "There will be no gossip of

me. It is Anne and Barbara thou must look to, Dad, lest their plain faces lead them to show soft hearts. My face is my fortune!"

When Sir John Oxon paid his visit to Sir Jeffry the days of Mistress Margery were filled with carking care. The night before he arrived, Mistress Clorinda called her to her closet and laid upon her her commands in her own high way. She was under her woman's hands, and while her great mantle of black hair fell over the back of her chair and lay on the floor, her tirewoman passing the brush over it, lock by lock, she was at her greatest beauty. Either she had been angered or pleased, for her cheek wore a bloom even deeper and richer than usual, and there was a spark like a diamond under the fringe of her lashes.

At her first timorous glance at her, Mistress Margery thought she must have been angered, the spark so burned in her eyes, and so evident was the light but quick heave of her bosom; but the next moment it seemed as if she must be in a pleasant humour, for a little smile deepened the dimples in the corner of her bowed, full lips. But quickly she looked up and resumed her stately air.

"This gentleman who comes to visit to-morrow," she said, "Sir John Oxon--do you know aught of him?"

"But little, Madame," Mistress Margery answered with fear and humility.

"Then it will be well that you should, since I have commands to lay upon

you concerning him," said the beauty.

"You do me honour," said the poor gentlewoman.

Mistress Clorinda looked her straight in the face.

"He is a gentleman from town, the kinsman of Lord Eldershawe," she said.

"He is a handsome man, concerning whom many women have been fools.
He

chooses to allow it to be said that he is a conqueror of female hearts
and virtue, even among women of fashion and rank. If this be said in the
town, what may not be said in the country? He shall wear no such graces
here. He chooses to pay his court to me. He is my father's guest and a
man of fashion. Let him make as many fine speeches as he has the will
to. I will listen or not as I choose. I am used to words. But see that
we are not left alone."

The tirewoman pricked up her ears. Clorinda saw her in the glass.

"Attend to thy business if thou dost not want a box o' the ear," she said
in a tone which made the woman start.

"You would not be left alone with the gentleman, Madam?" faltered
Mistress Margery.

"If he comes to boast of conquests," said Mistress Clorinda, looking at

her straight again and drawing down her black brows, "I will play as cleverly as he. He cannot boast greatly of one whom he never makes his court to but in the presence of a kinswoman of ripe years. Understand that this is to be your task."

"I will remember," Madam, answered Mistress Margery. "I will bear myself as you command."

"That is well," said Mistress Clorinda. "I will keep you no more. You may go."