

CHAPTER VI--Relating how Mistress Anne discovered a miniature

The good gentlewoman took her leave gladly. She had spent a life in timid fears of such things and persons as were not formed by Nature to excite them, but never had she experienced such humble terrors as those with which Mistress Clorinda inspired her. Never did she approach her without inward tremor, and never did she receive permission to depart from her presence without relief. And yet her beauty and wit and spirit had no admirer regarding them with more of wondering awe.

In the bare west wing of the house, comfortless though the neglect of its master had made it, there was one corner where she was unafraid. Her first charges, Mistress Barbara and Mistress Anne, were young ladies of gentle spirit. Their sister had said of them that their spirit was as poor as their looks. It could not be said of them by any one that they had any pretension to beauty, but that which Mistress Clorinda rated at as poor spirit was the one element of comfort in their poor dependent kinswoman's life. They gave her no ill words, they indulged in no fantastical whims and vapours, and they did not even seem to expect other entertainment than to walk the country roads, to play with their little lap-dog Cupid, wind silks for their needlework, and please themselves with their embroidery-frames.

To them their sister appeared a goddess whom it would be presumptuous to approach in any frame of mind quite ordinary. Her beauty must be

heightened by rich adornments, while their plain looks were left without the poorest aid. It seemed but fitting that what there was to spend must be spent on her. They showed no signs of resentment, and took with gratitude such cast-off finery as she deigned at times to bestow upon them, when it was no longer useful to herself. She was too full of the occupations of pleasure to have had time to notice them, even if her nature had inclined her to the observance of family affections. It was their habit, when they knew of her going out in state, to watch her incoming and outgoing through a peep-hole in a chamber window. Mistress Margery told them stories of her admirers and of her triumphs, of the county gentlemen of fortune who had offered themselves to her, and of the modes of life in town of the handsome Sir John Oxon, who, without doubt, was of the circle of her admiring attendants, if he had not fallen totally her victim, as others had.

Of the two young women, it was Mistress Anne who had the more parts, and the attraction of the mind the least dull. In sooth, Nature had dealt with both in a niggardly fashion, but Mistress Barbara was the plainer and the more foolish. Mistress Anne had, perchance, the tenderer feelings, and was in secret given to a certain sentimentality. She was thin and stooping, and had but a muddy complexion; her hair was heavy, it is true, but its thickness and weight seemed naught but an ungrateful burden; and she had a dull, soft eye. In private she was fond of reading such romances as she could procure by stealth from the library of books gathered together in past times by some ancestor Sir Jeffry regarded as an idiot. Doubtless she met with strange reading in the volumes she took

to her closet, and her simple virgin mind found cause for the solving of many problems; but from the pages she contrived to cull stories of lordly lovers and cruel or kind beauties, whose romances created for her a strange world of pleasure in the midst of her loneliness. Poor, neglected young female, with every guileless maiden instinct withered at birth, she had need of some tender dreams to dwell upon, though Fate herself seemed to have decreed that they must be no more than visions.

It was, in sooth, always the beauteous Clorinda about whose charms she builded her romances. In her great power she saw that for which knights fought in tourney and great kings committed royal sins, and to her splendid beauty she had in secrecy felt that all might be forgiven. She cherished such fancies of her, that one morning, when she believed her absent from the house, she stole into the corridor upon which Clorinda's apartment opened. Her first timid thought had been, that if a chamber door were opened she might catch a glimpse of some of the splendours her sister's woman was surely laying out for her wearing at a birth-night ball, at the house of one of the gentry of the neighbourhood. But it so happened that she really found the door of entrance open, which, indeed, she had not more than dared to hope, and finding it so, she stayed her footsteps to gaze with beating heart within. On the great bed, which was of carved oak and canopied with tattered tapestry, there lay spread such splendours as she had never beheld near to before. 'Twas blue and silver brocade Mistress Clorinda was to shine in to-night; it lay spread forth in all its dimensions. The beautiful bosom and shoulders were to be bared to the eyes of scores of adorers, but rich lace was to set their

beauties forth, and strings of pearls. Why Sir Jeffry had not sold his lady's jewels before he became enamoured of her six-year-old child it would be hard to explain. There was a great painted fan with jewels in the sticks, and on the floor--as if peeping forth from beneath the bravery of the expanded petticoats--was a pair of blue and silver shoes, high-heeled and arched and slender. In gazing at them Mistress Anne lost her breath, thinking that in some fashion they had a regal air of being made to trample hearts beneath them.

To the gentle, hapless virgin, to whom such possessions were as the wardrobe of a queen, the temptation to behold them near was too great. She could not forbear from passing the threshold, and she did with heaving breast. She approached the bed and gazed; she dared to touch the scented gloves that lay by the outspread petticoat of blue and silver; she even laid a trembling finger upon the pointed bodice, which was so slender that it seemed small enough for even a child.

"Ah me," she sighed gently, "how beautiful she will be! How beautiful! And all of them will fall at her feet, as is not to be wondered at. And it was always so all her life, even when she was an infant, and all gave her her will because of her beauty and her power. She hath a great power. Barbara and I are not so. We are dull and weak, and dare not speak our minds. It is as if we were creatures of another world; but He who rules all things has so willed it for us. He has given it to us for our portion--our portion."

Her dull, poor face dropped a little as she spoke the words, and her eyes fell upon the beautiful tiny shoes, which seemed to trample even when no foot was within them. She stooped to take one in her hand, but as she was about to lift it something which seemed to have been dropped upon the floor, and to have rolled beneath the valance of the bed, touched her hand. It was a thing to which a ribbon was attached--an ivory miniature--and she picked it up wondering. She stood up gazing at it, in such bewilderment to find her eyes upon it that she scarce knew what she did. She did not mean to pry; she would not have had the daring so to do if she had possessed the inclination. But the instant her eyes told her what they saw, she started and blushed as she had never blushed before in her tame life. The warm rose mantled her cheeks, and even suffused the neck her chaste kerchief hid. Her eye kindled with admiration and an emotion new to her indeed.

"How beautiful!" she said. "He is like a young Adonis, and has the bearing of a royal prince! How can it--by what strange chance hath it come here?"

She had not regarded it more than long enough to have uttered these words, when a fear came upon her, and she felt that she had fallen into misfortune.

"What must I do with it?" she trembled. "What will she say, whether she knows of its being within the chamber or not? She will be angry with me that I have dared to touch it. What shall I do?"

She regarded it again with eyes almost suffused. Her blush and the sensibility of her emotion gave to her plain countenance a new liveliness of tint and expression.

"I will put it back where I found it," she said, "and the one who knows it will find it later. It cannot be she--it cannot be she! If I laid it on her table she would rate me bitterly--and she can be bitter when she will."

She bent and placed it within the shadow of the valance again, and as she felt it touch the hard oak of the polished floor her bosom rose with a soft sigh.

"It is an unseemly thing to do," she said; "'tis as though one were uncivil; but I dare not--I dare not do otherwise."

She would have turned to leave the apartment, being much overcome by the incident, but just as she would have done so she heard the sound of horses' feet through the window by which she must pass, and looked out to see if it was Clorinda who was returning from her ride. Mistress Clorinda was a matchless horsewoman, and a marvel of loveliness and spirit she looked when she rode, sitting upon a horse such as no other woman dared to mount--always an animal of the greatest beauty, but of so dangerous a spirit that her riding-whip was loaded like a man's.

This time it was not she; and when Mistress Anne beheld the young gentleman who had drawn rein in the court she started backward and put her hand to her heart, the blood mantling her pale cheek again in a flood. But having started back, the next instant she started forward to gaze again, all her timid soul in her eyes.

"'Tis he!" she panted; "'tis he himself! He hath come in hope to speak with my sister, and she is abroad. Poor gentleman, he hath come in such high spirit, and must ride back heavy of heart. How comely, and how finely clad he is!"

He was, in sooth, with his rich riding-habit, his handsome face, his plumed hat, and the sun shining on the fair luxuriant locks which fell beneath it. It was Sir John Oxon, and he was habited as when he rode in the park in town and the court was there. Not so were attired the country gentry whom Anne had been wont to see, though many of them were well mounted, knowing horseflesh and naught else, as they did.

She pressed her cheek against the side of the oriel window, over which the ivy grew thickly. She was so intent that she could not withdraw her gaze. She watched him as he turned away, having received his dismissal, and she pressed her face closer that she might follow him as he rode down the long avenue of oak-trees, his servant riding behind.

Thus she bent forward gazing, until he turned and the oaks hid him from

her sight; and even then the spell was not dissolved, and she still regarded the place where he had passed, until a sound behind her made her start violently. It was a peal of laughter, high and rich, and when she so started and turned to see whom it might be, she beheld her sister Clorinda, who was standing just within the threshold, as if movement had been arrested by what had met her eye as she came in. Poor Anne put her hand to her side again.

"Oh sister!" she gasped; "oh sister!" but could say no more.

She saw that she had thought falsely, and that Clorinda had not been out at all, for she was in home attire; and even in the midst of her trepidation there sprang into Anne's mind the awful thought that through some servant's blunder the comely young visitor had been sent away. For herself, she expected but to be driven forth with wrathful, disdainful words for her presumption. For what else could she hope from this splendid creature, who, while of her own flesh and blood, had never seemed to regard her as being more than a poor superfluous underling? But

strangely enough, there was no anger in Clorinda's eyes; she but laughed, as though what she had seen had made her merry.

"You here, Anne," she said, "and looking with light-mindedness after gallant gentlemen! Mistress Margery should see to this and watch more closely, or we shall have unseemly stories told. You, sister, with your modest face and bashfulness! I had not thought it of you."

Suddenly she crossed the room to where her sister stood drooping, and seized her by the shoulder, so that she could look her well in the face.

"What," she said, with a mocking not quite harsh--"What is this? Does a glance at a fine gallant, even taken from behind an oriel window, make such change indeed? I never before saw this look, nor this colour, forsooth; it hath improved thee wondrously, Anne--wondrously."

"Sister," faltered Anne, "I so desired to see your birth-night ball-gown, of which Mistress Margery hath much spoken--I so desired--I thought it would not matter if, the door being open and it spread forth upon the bed--I--I stole a look at it. And then I was tempted--and came in."

"And then was tempted more," Clorinda laughed, still regarding her downcast countenance shrewdly, "by a thing far less to be resisted--a fine gentleman from town, with love-locks falling on his shoulders and ladies' hearts strung at his saddle-bow by scores. Which found you the most beautiful?"

"Your gown is splendid, sister," said Anne, with modest shyness. "There will be no beauty who will wear another like it; or should there be one, she will not carry it as you will."

"But the man--the man, Anne," Clorinda laughed again. "What of the man?"

Anne plucked up just enough of her poor spirit to raise her eyes to the brilliant ones that mocked at her.

"With such gentlemen, sister," she said, "is it like that I have aught to do?"

Mistress Clorinda dropped her hand and left laughing.

"'Tis true," she said, "it is not; but for this one time, Anne, thou lookest almost a woman."

"'Tis not beauty alone that makes womanhood," said Anne, her head on her breast again. "In some book I have read that--that it is mostly pain. I am woman enough for that."

"You have read--you have read," quoted Clorinda. "You are the bookworm, I remember, and filch romances and poems from the shelves. And you have read that it is mostly pain that makes a woman? 'Tis not true. 'Tis a poor lie. I am a woman and I do not suffer--for I will not, that I swear! And when I take an oath I keep it, mark you! It is men women suffer for; that was what your scholar meant--for such fine gentlemen as the one you have just watched while he rode away. More fools they! No man shall make me womanly in such a fashion, I promise you! Let them wince and kneel; I will not."

"Sister," Anne faltered, "I thought you were not within. The gentleman

who rode away--did the servants know?"

"That did they," quoth Clorinda, mocking again. "They knew that I would not receive him to-day, and so sent him away. He might have known as much himself, but he is an arrant popinjay, and thinks all women wish to look at his fine shape, and hear him flatter them when he is in the mood."

"You would not--let him enter?"

Clorinda threw her graceful body into a chair with more light laughter.

"I would not", she answered. "You cannot understand such ingratitude, poor Anne; you would have treated him more softly. Sit down and talk to me, and I will show thee my furbelows myself. All women like to chatter of their laced bodices and petticoats. That is what makes a woman."

Anne was tremulous with relief and pleasure. It was as if a queen had bid her to be seated. She sat almost with the humble lack of case a serving-woman might have shown. She had never seen Clorinda wear such an air before, and never had she dreamed that she would so open herself to any fellow-creature. She knew but little of what her sister was capable--of the brilliancy of her charm when she chose to condescend, of the deigning softness of her manner when she chose to please, of her arch-pleasantries and cutting wit, and of the strange power she could wield

over any human being, gentle or simple, with whom she came in contact. But if she had not known of these things before, she learned to know them this morning. For some reason best known to herself, Mistress Clorinda was in a high good humour. She kept Anne with her for more than an hour, and was dazzling through every moment of its passing. She showed her the splendours she was to shine in at the birth-night ball, even bringing forth her jewels and displaying them. She told her stories of the house of which the young heir to-day attained his majority, and mocked at the poor youth because he was ungainly, and at a distance had been her slave since his nineteenth year.

"I have scarce looked at him," she said. "He is a lout, with great eyes staring, and a red nose. It does not need that one should look at men to win them. They look at us, and that is enough."

To poor Mistress Anne, who had seen no company and listened to no wits, the entertainment bestowed upon her was as wonderful as a night at the playhouse would have been. To watch the vivid changing face; to hearken to jesting stories of men and women who seemed like the heroes and heroines of her romances; to hear love itself--the love she trembled and palpitated at the mere thought of--spoken of openly as an experience which fell to all; to hear it mocked at with dainty or biting quips; to learn that women of all ages played with, enjoyed, or lost themselves for it--it was with her as if a nun had been withdrawn from her cloister and plunged into the vortex of the world.

"Sister," she said, looking at the Beauty with humble, adoring eyes, "you make me feel that my romances are true. You tell such things. It is like seeing pictures of things to hear you talk. No wonder that all listen to you, for indeed 'tis wonderful the way you have with words. You use them so that 'tis as though they had shapes of their own and colours, and you builded with them. I thank you for being so gracious to me, who have seen so little, and cannot tell the poor, quiet things I have seen."

And being led into the loving boldness by her gratitude, she bent forward and touched with her lips the fair hand resting on the chair's arm.

Mistress Clorinda fixed her fine eyes upon her in a new way.

"I' faith, it doth not seem fair, Anne," she said. "I should not like to change lives with thee. Thou hast eyes like a shot pheasant--soft, and with the bright hid beneath the dull. Some man might love them, even if thou art no beauty. Stay," suddenly; "methinks--"

She uprose from her chair and went to the oaken wardrobe, and threw the door of it open wide while she looked within.

"There is a gown and tippet or so here, and a hood and some ribands I might do without," she said. "My woman shall bear them to your chamber, and show you how to set them to rights. She is a nimble-fingered creature, and a gown of mine would give almost stuff enough to make you two. Then some days, when I am not going abroad and Mistress Margery

frets me too much, I will send for you to sit with me, and you shall listen to the gossip when a visitor drops in to have a dish of tea."

Anne would have kissed her feet then, if she had dared to do so. She blushed red all over, and adored her with a more worshipping gaze than before.

"I should not have dared to hope so much," she stammered. "I could not--perhaps it is not fitting--perhaps I could not bear myself as I should. I would try to show myself a gentlewoman and seemly. I--I am a gentlewoman, though I have learned so little. I could not be aught but a gentlewoman, could I, sister, being of your own blood and my parents' child?" half afraid to presume even this much.

"No," said Clorinda. "Do not be a fool, Anne, and carry yourself too humbly before the world. You can be as humble as you like to me."

"I shall--I shall be your servant and worship you, sister," cried the poor soul, and she drew near and kissed again the white hand which had bestowed with such royal bounty all this joy. It would not have occurred to her that a cast-off robe and riband were but small largesse.

It was not a minute after this grateful caress that Clorinda made a sharp movement--a movement which was so sharp that it seemed to be one of dismay. At first, as if involuntarily, she had raised her hand to her tucker, and after doing so she started--though 'twas but for a second's

space, after which her face was as it had been before.

"What is it?" exclaimed Anne. "Have you lost anything?"

"No," quoth Mistress Clorinda quite carelessly, as she once more turned to the contents of the oaken wardrobe; "but I thought I missed a trinket I was wearing for a wager, and I would not lose it before the bet is won."

"Sister," ventured Anne before she left her and went away to her own dull world in the west wing, "there is a thing I can do if you will allow me. I can mend your tapestry hangings which have holes in them. I am quick at my needle, and should love to serve you in such poor ways as I can; and it is not seemly that they should be so worn. All things about you should be beautiful and well kept."

"Can you make these broken things beautiful?" said Clorinda. "Then indeed you shall. You may come here to mend them when you will."

"They are very fine hangings, though so old and ill cared for," said Anne, looking up at them; "and I shall be only too happy sitting here thinking of all you are doing while I am at my work."

"Thinking of all I am doing?" laughed Mistress Clorinda. "That would give you such wondrous things to dream of, Anne, that you would have no time for your needle, and my hangings would stay as they are."

"I can think and darn also," said Mistress Anne, "so I will come."