

CHAPTER VII--'Twas the face of Sir John Oxon the moon shone upon

From that time henceforward into the young woman's dull life there came a little change. It did not seem a little change to her, but a great one, though to others it would have seemed slight indeed. She was an affectionate, house-wifely creature, who would have made the best of wives and mothers if it had been so ordained by Fortune, and something of her natural instincts found outlet in the furtive service she paid her sister, who became the empress of her soul. She darned and patched the tattered hangings with a wonderful neatness, and the hours she spent at work in the chamber were to her almost as sacred as hours spent at religious duty, or as those nuns and novices give to embroidering altar-cloths. There was a brightness in the room that seemed in no other in the house, and the lingering essences in the air of it were as incense to her. In secrecy she even busied herself with keeping things in better order than Rebecca, Mistress Clorinda's woman, had ever had time to do before. She also contrived to get into her own hands some duties that were Rebecca's own. She could mend lace cleverly and arrange riband-knots with taste, and even change the fashion of a gown. The hard-worked tirewoman was but too glad to be relieved, and kept her secret well, being praised many times for the set or fashion of a thing into which she had not so much as set a needle. Being a shrewd baggage, she was wise enough always to relate to Anne the story of her mistress's pleasure, having the wit to read in her delight that she would be encouraged to fresh effort.

At times it so befell that, when Anne went into the bed-chamber, she found the beauty there, who, if she chanced to be in the humour, would detain her in her presence for a space and bewitch her over again. In sooth, it seemed that she took a pleasure in showing her female adorer how wondrously full of all fascinations she could be. At such times Anne's plain face would almost bloom with excitement, and her shot pheasant's eyes would glow as if beholding a goddess.

She neither saw nor heard more of the miniature on the riband. It used to make her tremble at times to fancy that by some strange chance it might still be under the bed, and that the handsome face smiled and the blue eyes gazed in the very apartment where she herself sat and her sister was robed and disrobed in all her beauty.

She used all her modest skill in fitting to her own shape and refurnishing the cast-off bits of finery bestowed upon her. It was all set to rights long before Clorinda recalled to mind that she had promised that Anne should sometime see her chance visitors take their dish of tea with her.

But one day, for some cause, she did remember, and sent for her.

Anne ran to her bed-chamber and donned her remodelled gown with shaking

hands. She laughed a little hysterically as she did it, seeing her plain

snub-nosed face in the glass. She tried to dress her head in a fashion new to her, and knew she did it ill and untidily, but had no time to change it. If she had had some red she would have put it on, but such vanities were not in her chamber or Barbara's. So she rubbed her cheeks hard, and even pinched them, so that in the end they looked as if they were badly rouged. It seemed to her that her nose grew red too, and indeed 'twas no wonder, for her hands and feet were like ice.

"She must be ashamed of me," the humble creature said to herself. "And if she is ashamed she will be angered and send me away and be friends no more."

She did not deceive herself, poor thing, and imagine she had the chance of being regarded with any great lenience if she appeared ill.

"Mistress Clorinda begged that you would come quickly," said Rebecca, knocking at the door.

So she caught her handkerchief, which was scented, as all her garments were, with dried rose-leaves from the garden, which she had conserved herself, and went down to the chintz parlour trembling.

It was a great room with white panels, and flowered coverings to the furniture. There were a number of ladies and gentlemen standing talking and laughing loudly together. The men outnumbered the women, and most of

them stood in a circle about Mistress Clorinda, who sat upright in a great flowered chair, smiling with her mocking, stately air, as if she defied them to dare to speak what they felt.

Anne came in like a mouse. Nobody saw her. She did not, indeed, know what to do. She dared not remain standing all alone, so she crept to the place where her sister's chair was, and stood a little behind its high back. Her heart beat within her breast till it was like to choke her.

They were only country gentlemen who made the circle, but to her they seemed dashing gallants. That some of them had red noses as well as cheeks, and that their voices were big and their gallantries boisterous, was no drawback to their manly charms, she having seen no other finer gentlemen. They were specimens of the great conquering creature Man, whom all women must aspire to please if they have the fortunate power; and each and all of them were plainly trying to please Clorinda, and not she them.

And so Anne gazed at them with admiring awe, waiting until there should come a pause in which she might presume to call her sister's attention to her presence; but suddenly, before she had indeed made up her mind how she might best announce herself, there spoke behind her a voice of silver.

"It is only goddesses," said the voice, "who waft about them as they move the musk of the rose-gardens of Araby. When you come to reign over us in

town, Madam, there will be no perfume in the mode but that of rose-leaves, and in all drawing-rooms we shall breathe but their perfume."

And there, at her side, was bowing, in cinnamon and crimson, with jewelled buttons on his velvet coat, the beautiful being whose fair locks the sun had shone on the morning she had watched him ride away--the man

whom the imperial beauty had dismissed and called a popinjay.

Clorinda looked under her lashes towards him without turning, but in so doing beheld Anne standing in waiting.

"A fine speech lost," she said, "though 'twas well enough for the country, Sir John. 'Tis thrown away, because 'tis not I who am scented with rose-leaves, but Anne there, whom you must not ogle. Come hither, sister, and do not hide as if you were ashamed to be looked at."

And she drew her forward, and there Anne stood, and all of them stared at her poor, plain, blushing face, and the Adonis in cinnamon and crimson bowed low, as if she had been a duchess, that being his conqueror's way with gentle or simple, maid, wife, or widow, beauty or homespun uncomeliness.

It was so with him always; he could never resist the chance of luring to himself a woman's heart, whether he wanted it or not, and he had a charm,

a strange and wonderful one, it could not be denied. Anne palpitated indeed as she made her curtsy to him, and wondered if Heaven had ever before made so fine a gentleman and so beautiful a being.

She went but seldom to this room again, and when she went she stood always in the background, far more in fear that some one would address her than that she should meet with neglect. She was used to neglect, and to being regarded as a nonentity, and aught else discomfited her. All her pleasure was to hear what was said, though 'twas not always of the finest wit--and to watch Clorinda play the queen among her admirers and her slaves. She would not have dared to speak of Sir John Oxon frequently--indeed, she let fall his name but rarely; but she learned a curious wit in contriving to hear all things concerning him. It was her habit cunningly to lead Mistress Margery to talking about him and relating long histories of his conquests and his grace. Mistress Wimpole knew many of them, having, for a staid and prudent matron, a lively interest in his ways. It seemed, truly--if one must believe her long-winded stories--that no duchess under seventy had escaped weeping for him and losing rest, and that ladies of all ranks had committed follies for his sake.

Mistress Anne, having led her to this fruitful subject, would sit and listen, bending over her embroidery frame with strange emotions, causing her virgin breast to ache with their swelling. She would lie awake at night thinking in the dark, with her heart beating. Surely, surely there was no other man on earth who was so fitted to Clorinda, and to whom it

was so suited that this empress should give her charms. Surely no woman, however beautiful or proud, could dismiss his suit when he pressed it.

And then, poor woman, her imagination strove to paint the splendour of their mutual love, though of such love she knew so little. But it must, in sooth, be bliss and rapture; and perchance, was her humble thought, she might see it from afar, and hear of it. And when they went to court, and Clorinda had a great mansion in town, and many servants who needed a

housewife's eye upon their doings to restrain them from wastefulness and riot, might it not chance to be that if she served well now, and had the courage to plead with her then, she might be permitted to serve her there, living quite apart in some quiet corner of the house. And then her wild thoughts would go so far that she would dream--reddening at her own boldness--of a child who might be born to them, a lordly infant son and heir, whose eyes might be blue and winning, and his hair in great fair locks, and whom she might nurse and tend and be a slave to--and love--and love--and love, and who might end by knowing she was his tender servant, always to be counted on, and might look at her with that wooing, laughing glance, and even love her too.

The night Clorinda laid her commands upon Mistress Wimpole concerning the

coming of Sir John Oxon, that matron, after receiving them, hurried to her other charges, flurried and full of talk, and poured forth her wonder and admiration at length.

"She is a wondrous lady!" she said--"she is indeed! It is not alone her

beauty, but her spirit and her wit. Mark you how she sees all things and lets none pass, and can lay a plan as prudent as any lady old enough to be twice her mother. She knows all the ways of the world of fashion, and will guard herself against gossip in such a way that none can gainsay her high virtue. Her spirit is too great to allow that she may even seem to be as the town ladies. She will not have it! Sir John will not find his court easy to pay. She will not allow that he shall be able to say to any one that he has seen her alone a moment. Thus, she says, he cannot boast. If all ladies were as wise and cunning, there would be no tales to tell." She talked long and garrulously, and set forth to them how Mistress Clorinda had looked straight at her with her black eyes, until she had almost shaken as she sat, because it seemed as though she dared her to disobey her will; and how she had sat with her hair trailing upon the floor over the chair's back, and at first it had seemed that she was flushed with anger, but next as if she had smiled.

"Betimes," said Mistress Wimpole, "I am afraid when she smiles, but to-night some thought had crossed her mind that pleased her. I think it was that she liked to think that he who has conquered so many ladies will find that he is to be outwitted and made a mock of. She likes that others shall be beaten if she thinks them impudent. She liked it as a child, and would flog the stable-boys with her little whip until they knelt to beg her pardon for their freedoms."

That night Mistress Anne went to her bed-chamber with her head full of wandering thoughts, and she had not the power to bid them disperse

themselves and leave her--indeed, she scarce wished for it. She was thinking of Clorinda, and wondering sadly that she was of so high a pride that she could bear herself as though there were no human weakness in her breast, not even the womanly weakness of a heart. How could it be possible that she could treat with disdain this gallant gentleman, if he loved her, as he surely must? Herself she had been sure that she had seen an ardent flame in his blue eyes, even that first day when he had bowed to her with that air of grace as he spoke of the fragrance of the rose leaves he had thought wafted from her robe. How could a woman whom he loved resist him? How could she cause him to suffer by forcing him to stand at arm's length when he sighed to draw near and breathe his passion at her feet?

In the silence of her chamber as she disrobed, she sighed with restless pain, but did not know that her sighing was for grief that love--of which there seemed so little in some lives--could be wasted and flung away. She could not fall into slumber when she lay down upon her pillow, but tossed from side to side with a burdened heart.

"She is so young and beautiful and proud," she thought. "It is because I am so much older that I can see these things--that I see that this is surely the one man who should be her husband. There may be many others, but they are none of them her equals, and she would scorn and hate them when she was once bound to them for life. This one is as beautiful as she--and full of grace, and wit, and spirit. She could not look down

upon him, however wrath she was at any time. Ah me! She should not spurn him, surely she should not!"

She was so restless and ill at ease that she could not lie upon her bed, but rose therefrom, as she often did in her wakeful hours, and went to her lattice, gently opening it to look out upon the night, and calm herself by sitting with her face uplifted to the stars, which from her childhood she had fancied looked down upon her kindly and as if they would give her comfort.

To-night there were no stars. There should have been a moon three-quarters full, but, in the evening, clouds had drifted across the sky and closed over all heavily, so that no moonlight was to be seen, save when a rare sudden gust made a ragged rent, for a moment, in the blackness.

She did not sit this time, but knelt, clad in her night-rail as she was. All was sunk into the profoundest silence of the night. By this time the entire household had been long enough abed to be plunged in sleep. She alone was waking, and being of that simple mind which, like a child's, must ever bear its trouble to a protecting strength, she looked up at the darkness of the cloudy sky and prayed for the better fortune of the man who had indeed not remembered her existence after the moment he had made her his obeisance. She was too plain and sober a creature to be remembered.

"Perchance," she murmured, "he is at this moment also looking at the clouds from his window, because he cannot sleep for thinking that in two days he will be beneath her father's roof and will see her loveliness, and he must needs be contriving within his mind what he will say, if she do but look as if she might regard him with favour, which I pray she will."

From the path below, that moment there rose a slight sound, so slight a one that for a moment she thought she must have been deceived in believing it had fallen upon her ear. All was still after it for full two minutes, and had she heard no more she would have surely forgotten she had heard aught, or would have believed herself but the victim of fancy. But after the long pause the same sound came again, though this time it was slighter; yet, despite its slightness, it seemed to her to be the crushing of the earth and stone beneath a cautious foot. It was a foot so cautious that it was surely stealthy and scarce dared to advance at all. And then all was still again. She was for a moment overcome with fears, not being of a courageous temper, and having heard, but of late, of a bold gipsy vagabond who, with a companion, had broken into the lower rooms of a house of the neighbourhood, and being surprised by its owner, had only been overcome and captured after a desperate fight, in which shots were exchanged, and one of the hurriedly-awakened servants killed. So she leaned forward to hearken further, wondering what she should do to best alarm the house, and, as she bent so, she heard the sound again and a smothered oath, and with her straining eyes saw that

surely upon the path there stood a dark-draped figure. She rose with great care to her feet, and stood a moment shaking and clinging to the window-ledge, while she bethought her of what servants she could wake first, and how she could reach her father's room. Her poor heart beat in her side, and her breath came quickly. The soundlessness of the night was broken by one of the strange sudden gusts of wind which tossed the trees, and tore at the clouds as they hurried. She heard the footsteps again, as if it feared its own sound the less when the wind might cover it. A faint pale gleam showed between two dark clouds behind which the moon had been hidden; it grew brighter, and a jagged rent was torn, so that the moon herself for a second or so shone out dazzling bright before the clouds rushed over her again and shut her in.

It was at this very instant Mistress Anne heard the footsteps once more, and saw full well a figure in dark cloak and hat which stepped quickly into the shade of a great tree. But more she saw--and clapped her hand upon her mouth to stifle the cry that would have otherwise risen in spite of her--that notwithstanding his fair locks were thrust out of sight beneath his hat, and he looked strange and almost uncomely, it was the face of Sir John Oxon, the moon, bursting through the jagged clouds, had shone upon.