

CHAPTER VIII--Two meet in the deserted rose garden, and the old Earl of Dunstanwolde is made a happy man

It was not until three days later, instead of two, that Sir John Oxon rode into the courtyard with his servant behind him. He had been detained on his journey, but looked as if his impatience had not caused him to suffer, for he wore his finest air of spirit and beauty, and when he was alone with Sir Jeoffry, made his compliments to the absent ladies, and inquired of their health with his best town grace.

Mistress Clorinda did not appear until the dining hour, when she swept into the room like a queen, followed by her sister, Anne, and Mistress Wimpole, this being the first occasion of Mistress Anne's dining, as it were, in state with her family.

The honour had so alarmed her, that she looked pale, and so ugly that Sir Jeoffry scowled at sight of her, and swore under his breath to Clorinda that she should have been allowed to come.

"I know my own affairs the best, by your leave, sir," answered Clorinda, as low and with a grand flash of her eye. "She hath been drilled well."

This she had indeed, and so had Mistress Wimpole, and throughout Sir John

Oxon's stay they were called upon to see that they played well their

parts. Two weeks he stayed and then rode gaily back to town, and when Clorinda made her sweeping curtsey to the ground to him upon the threshold of the flowered room in which he bade her farewell, both Anne and Mistress Wimpole curtseyed a step behind her.

"Now that he has gone and you have shown me that you can attend me as I wish," she said, turning to them as the sound of his horse's hoofs died away, "it will not trouble me should he choose some day to come again. He has not carried with him much that he can boast of."

In truth, it seemed to the outer world that she had held him well in hand. If he had come as a sighing lover, the whole county knew she had shown him but small favour. She had invited companies to the house on several occasions, and all could see how she bore herself towards him. She carried herself with a certain proud courtesy as becoming the daughter of his host, but her wit did not spare him, and sometimes when it was more than in common cutting he was seen to wince though he held himself gallantly. There were one or two who thought they now and then had seen his blue eyes fall upon her when he believed none were looking, and rest there burningly for a moment, but 'twas never for more than an instant, when he would rouse himself with a start and turn away.

She had been for a month or two less given to passionate outbreaks, having indeed decided that it was to her interest as a young lady and a future great one to curb herself. Her tirewoman, Rebecca, had begun to dare to breathe more freely when she was engaged about her person, and

had, in truth, spoken of her pleasanter fortune among her fellows in the servants' hall.

But a night or two after the visitor took his departure, she gave way to such an outburst as even Rebecca had scarce ever beheld, being roused to it by a small thing in one sense, though in yet another perhaps great enough, since it touched upon the despoiling of one of her beauties.

She was at her toilet-table being prepared for the night, and her long hair brushed and dressed before retiring. Mistress Wimpole had come in to the chamber to do something at her bidding, and chancing to stand gazing at her great and heavy fall of locks as she was waiting, she observed a thing which caused her, foolish woman that she was, to give a start and utter an unwise exclamation.

"Madam!" she gasped--"madam!"

"What then!" quoth Mistress Clorinda angrily. "You bring my heart to my throat!"

"Your hair!" stammered Wimpole, losing all her small wit--"your beauteous hair! A lock is gone, madam!"

Clorinda started to her feet, and flung the great black mass over her white shoulder, that she might see it in the glass.

"Gone!" she cried. "Where? How? What mean you? Ah-h!"

Her voice rose to a sound that was well-nigh a scream. She saw the rifled spot--a place where a great lock had been severed jaggedly--and it must have been five feet long.

She turned and sprang upon her woman, her beautiful face distorted with fury, and her eyes like flames of fire. She seized her by each shoulder and boxed her ears until her head spun round and bells rang within it.

"'Twas you!" she shrieked. "'Twas you--she-devil-beast--slut that you are! 'Twas when you used your scissors to the new head you made for me. You set it on my hair that you might set a loop--and in your sluttish way you snipped a lock by accident and hid it from me."

She beat her till her own black hair flew about her like the mane of a fury; and having used her hands till they were tired, she took her brush from the table and beat her with that till the room echoed with the blows on the stout shoulders.

"Mistress, 'twas not so!" cried the poor thing, sobbing and struggling.

"'Twas not so, madam!"

"Madam, you will kill the woman," wept Mistress Wimpole. "I beseech you--! 'Tis not seemly, I beseech--"

Mistress Clorinda flung her woman from her and threw the brush at Mistress Wimpole, crying at her with the lordly rage she had been wont to shriek with when she wore breeches.

"Damnation to thy seemliness!" she cried, "and to thee too! Get thee gone--from me, both--get thee gone from my sight!"

And both women fled weeping, and sobbing, and gasping from the room incontinently.

She was shrewish and sullen with her woman for days after, and it was the poor creature's labour to keep from her sight, when she dressed her head, the place from whence the lock had been taken. In the servants' hall the woman vowed that it was not she who had cut it, that she had had no accident, though it was true she had used the scissors about her head, yet it was but in snipping a ribbon, and she had not touched a hair.

"If she were another lady," she said, "I should swear some gallant had robbed her of it; but, forsooth, she does not allow them to come near enough for such sport, and with five feet of hair wound up in coronals, how could a man unwind a lock, even if 'twas permitted him to stand at her very side."

Two years passed, and the beauty had no greater fields to conquer than those she found in the country, since her father, Sir Jeffry, had not the money to take her to town, he becoming more and more involved and so

fallen into debt that it was even whispered that at times it went hard with him to keep even the poor household he had.

Mistress Clorinda's fortunes the gentry of the neighbourhood discussed with growing interest and curiosity. What was like to become of her great gifts and powers in the end, if she could never show them to the great world, and have the chance to carry her splendid wares to the fashionable market where there were men of quality and wealth who would be like to bid for them. She had not chosen to accept any of those who had offered themselves so far, and it was believed that for some reason she had held off my lord of Dunstanwolde in his suit. 'Twas evident that he admired her greatly, and why he had not already made her his countess was a sort of mystery which was productive of many discussions and bore much talking over. Some said that, with all her beauty and his admiration, he was wary and waited, and some were pleased to say that the reason he waited was because the young lady herself contrived that he should, it being her desire to make an open conquest of Sir John Oxon, and show him to the world as her slave, before she made up her mind to make even a much greater match. Some hinted that for all her disdainfulness and haughty pride she would marry Sir John if he asked her, but that he being as brilliant a beau as she a beauty, he was too fond of his pleasures and his gay town life to give them up even to a goddess who had no fortune. His own had not been a great one, and he had squandered it magnificently, his extravagances being renowned in the world of fashion, and having indeed founded for him his reputation.

It was, however, still his way to accept frequent hospitalities from his kinsman Eldershaw, and Sir Jeffry was always rejoiced enough to secure him as his companion for a few days when he could lure him from the dissipation of the town. At such times it never failed that Mistress Wimpole and poor Anne kept their guard. Clorinda never allowed them to relax their vigilance, and Mistress Wimpole ceased to feel afraid, and became accustomed to her duties, but Anne never did so. She looked always her palest and ugliest when Sir John was in the house, and she would glance with sad wonder and timid adoration from him to Clorinda; but sometimes when she looked at Sir John her plain face would grow crimson, and once or twice he caught her at the folly, and when she dropped her eyes overwhelmed with shame, he faintly smiled to himself, seeing in her a new though humble conquest.

There came a day when in the hunting-field there passed from mouth to mouth a rumour, and Sir Jeffry, hearing it, came pounding over on his big black horse to his daughter and told it to her in great spirits.

"He is a sly dog, John Oxon," he said, a broad grin on his rubicund face.

"This very week he comes to us, and he and I are cronies, yet he has blabbed nothing of what is being buzzed about by all the world."

"He has learned how to keep a closed mouth," said Mistress Clorinda, without asking a question.

"But 'tis marriage he is so mum about, bless ye!" said Sir Jeffry. "And

that is not a thing to be hid long. He is to be shortly married, they say. My lady, his mother, has found him a great fortune in a new beauty but just come to town. She hath great estates in the West Indies, as well as a fine fortune in England--and all the world is besieging her; but Jack hath come and bowed sighing before her, and writ some verses, and borne her off from them all."

"'Tis time," said Clorinda, "that he should marry some woman who can pay his debts and keep him out of the spunging house, for to that he will come if he does not play his cards with skill."

Sir Jeffry looked at her askance and rubbed his red chin.

"I wish thou hadst liked him, Clo," he said, "and ye had both had fortunes to match. I love the fellow, and ye would have made a handsome pair."

Mistress Clorinda laughed, sitting straight in her saddle, her fine eyes unblenching, though the sun struck them.

"We had fortunes to match," she said--"I was a beggar and he was a spendthrift. Here comes Lord Dunstanwolde."

And as the gentleman rode near, it seemed to his dazzled eyes that the sun so shone down upon her because she was a goddess and drew it from the

heavens.

In the west wing of the Hall 'twas talked of between Mistress Wimpole and her charges, that a rumour of Sir John Oxon's marriage was afloat.

"Yet can I not believe it," said Mistress Margery; "for if ever a gentleman was deep in love, though he bitterly strove to hide it, 'twas Sir John, and with Mistress Clorinda."

"But she," faltered Anne, looking pale and even agitated--"she was always disdainful to him and held him at arm's length. I--I wished she would have treated him more kindly."

"'Tis not her way to treat men kindly," said Mistress Wimpole.

But whether the rumour was true or false--and there were those who bestowed no credit upon it, and said it was mere town talk, and that the same things had been bruited abroad before--it so chanced that Sir John paid no visit to his relative or to Sir Jeffry for several months. 'Twas heard once that he had gone to France, and at the French Court was making as great a figure as he had made at the English one, but of this even his kinsman Lord Eldershawe could speak no more certainly than he could of the first matter.

The suit of my Lord of Dunstanwolde--if suit it was--during these months

appeared to advance somewhat. All orders of surmises were made concerning it--that Mistress Clorinda had privately quarrelled with Sir John and sent him packing; that he had tired of his love-making, as 'twas well known he had done many times before, and having squandered his possessions and finding himself in open straits, must needs patch up his fortunes in a hurry with the first heiress whose estate suited him. But 'twas the women who said these things; the men swore that no man could tire of or desert such spirit and beauty, and that if Sir John Oxon stayed away 'twas because he had been commanded to do so, it never having been Mistress Clorinda's intention to do more than play with him awhile, she having been witty against him always for a fop, and meaning herself to accept no man as a husband who could not give her both rank and wealth.

"We know her," said the old boon companions of her childhood, as they talked of her over their bottles. "She knew her price and would bargain for it when she was not eight years old, and would give us songs and kisses but when she was paid for them with sweet things and knickknacks from the toy-shops. She will marry no man who cannot make her at least a countess, and she would take him but because there was not a duke at hand. We know her, and her beauty's ways."

But they did not know her; none knew her, save herself.

In the west wing, which grew more bare and ill-furnished as things wore

out and time went by, Mistress Anne waxed thinner and paler. She was so thin in two months' time, that her soft, dull eyes looked twice their natural size, and seemed to stare piteously at people. One day, indeed, as she sat at work in her sister's room, Clorinda being there at the time, the beauty, turning and beholding her face suddenly, uttered a violent exclamation.

"Why look you at me so?" she said. "Your eyes stand out of your head like a new-hatched, unfeathered bird's. They irk me with their strange asking look. Why do you stare at me?"

"I do not know," Anne faltered. "I could not tell you, sister. My eyes seem to stare so because of my thinness. I have seen them in my mirror."

"Why do you grow thin?" quoth Clorinda harshly. "You are not ill."

"I--I do not know," again Anne faltered. "Naught ails me. I do not know. For--forgive me!"

Clorinda laughed.

"Soft little fool," she said, "why should you ask me to forgive you? I might as fairly ask you to forgive me, that I keep my shape and show no wasting."

Anne rose from her chair and hurried to her sister's side, sinking upon

her knees there to kiss her hand.

"Sister," she said, "one could never dream that you could need pardon. I love you so--that all you do, it seems to me must be right--whatsoever it might be."

Clorinda drew her fair hands away and clasped them on the top of her head, proudly, as if she crowned herself thereby, her great and splendid eyes setting themselves upon her sister's face.

"All that I do," she said slowly, and with the steadfast high arrogance of an empress' self--"All that I do is right--for me. I make it so by doing it. Do you think that I am conquered by the laws that other women crouch and whine before, because they dare not break them, though they long to do so? I am my own law--and the law of some others."

It was by this time the first month of the summer, and to-night there was again a birth-night ball, at which the beauty was to dazzle all eyes; but 'twas of greater import than the one she had graced previously, it being to celebrate the majority of the heir to an old name and estate, who had been orphaned early, and was highly connected, counting, indeed, among the members of his family the Duke of Osmonde, who was one of the richest and most envied nobles in Great Britain, his dukedom being of the oldest, his numerous estates the most splendid and beautiful, and the long history of his family full of heroic deeds. This nobleman was also a distant kinsman to the Earl of Dunstanwolde, and at this ball, for the

first time for months, Sir John Oxon appeared again.

He did not arrive on the gay scene until an hour somewhat late. But there was one who had seen him early, though no human soul had known of the event.

In the rambling, ill-cared for grounds of Wildairs Hall there was an old rose-garden, which had once been the pride and pleasure of some lady of the house, though this had been long ago; and now it was but a lonely wilderness where roses only grew because the dead Lady Wildairs had loved them, and Barbara and Anne had tended them, and with their own hands planted and pruned during their childhood and young maiden days. But of late years even they had seemed to have forgotten it, having become discouraged, perchance, having no gardeners to do the rougher work, and the weeds and brambles so running riot. There were high hedges and winding paths overgrown and run wild; the stronger rose-bushes grew in tangled masses, flinging forth their rich blooms among the weeds; such as were more delicate, struggling to live among them, became more frail and scant-blossoming season by season; a careless foot would have trodden them beneath it as their branches grew long and trailed in the grass; but for many months no foot had trodden there at all, and it was a beautiful place deserted.

In the centre was an ancient broken sun-dial, which was in these days in the midst of a sort of thicket, where a bold tangle of the finest red roses clambered, and, defying neglect, flaunted their rich colour in the

sun.

And though the place had been so long forgotten, and it was not the custom for it to be visited, about this garlanded broken sun-dial the grass was a little trodden, and on the morning of the young heir's coming of age some one stood there in the glowing sunlight as if waiting.

This was no less than Mistress Clorinda herself. She was clad in a morning gown of white, which seemed to make of her more than ever a tall, transcendent creature, less a woman than a conquering goddess; and she had piled the dial with scarlet red roses, which she was choosing to weave into a massive wreath or crown, for some purpose best known to herself. Her head seemed haughtier and more splendidly held on high even than was its common wont, but upon these roses her lustrous eyes were downcast and were curiously smiling, as also was her ripe, arching lip, whose scarlet the blossoms vied with but poorly. It was a smile like this, perhaps, which Mistress Wimpole feared and trembled before, for 'twas not a tender smile nor a melting one. If she was waiting, she did not wait long, nor, to be sure, would she have long waited if she had been kept by any daring laggard. This was not her way.

'Twas not a laggard who came soon, stepping hurriedly with light feet upon the grass, as though he feared the sound which might be made if he had trodden upon the gravel. It was Sir John Oxon who came towards her in his riding costume.

He came and stood before her on the other side of the dial, and made her a bow so low that a quick eye might have thought 'twas almost mocking. His feather, sweeping the ground, caught a fallen rose, which clung to it. His beauty, when he stood upright, seemed to defy the very morning's self and all the morning world; but Mistress Clorinda did not lift her eyes, but kept them upon her roses, and went on weaving.

"Why did you choose to come?" she asked.

"Why did you choose to keep the tryst in answer to my message?" he replied to her.

At this she lifted her great shining eyes and fixed them full upon him.

"I wished," she said, "to hear what you would say--but more to see you than to hear."

"And I," he began--"I came--"

She held up her white hand with a long-stemmed rose in it--as though a queen should lift a sceptre.

"You came," she answered, "more to see me than to hear. You made that blunder."

"You choose to bear yourself like a goddess, and disdain me from Olympian

heights," he said. "I had the wit to guess it would be so."

She shook her royal head, faintly and most strangely smiling.

"That you had not," was her clear-worded answer. "That is a later thought sprung up since you have seen my face. 'Twas quick--for you--but not quick enough." And the smile in her eyes was maddening. "You thought to see a woman crushed and weeping, her beauty bent before you, her locks dishevelled, her streaming eyes lifted to Heaven--and you--with prayers, swearing that not Heaven could help her so much as your deigning magnanimity. You have seen women do this before, you would have seen me do it--at your feet--crying out that I was lost--lost for ever. That you expected! 'Tis not here."

Debauched as his youth was, and free from all touch of heart or conscience--for from his earliest boyhood he had been the pupil of rakes and fashionable villains--well as he thought he knew all women and their ways, betraying or betrayed--this creature taught him a new thing, a new mood in woman, a new power which came upon him like a thunderbolt.

"Gods!" he exclaimed, catching his breath, and even falling back apace, "Damnation! you are not a woman!"

She laughed again, weaving her roses, but not allowing that his eyes should loose themselves from hers.

"But now, you called me a goddess and spoke of Olympian heights," she said; "I am not one--I am a woman who would show other women how to bear themselves in hours like these. Because I am a woman why should I kneel, and weep, and rave? What have I lost--in losing you? I should have lost the same had I been twice your wife. What is it women weep and beat their breasts for--because they love a man--because they lose his love. They never have them."

She had finished the wreath, and held it up in the sun to look at it. What a strange beauty was hers, as she held it so--a heavy, sumptuous thing--in her white hands, her head thrown backward.

"You marry soon," she asked--"if the match is not broken?"

"Yes," he answered, watching her--a flame growing in his eyes and in his soul in his own despite.

"It cannot be too soon," she said. And she turned and faced him, holding the wreath high in her two hands poised like a crown above her head--the brilliant sun embracing her, her lips curling, her face uplifted as if she turned to defy the light, the crimson of her cheek. 'Twas as if from foot to brow the woman's whole person was a flame, rising and burning triumphant high above him. Thus for one second's space she stood, dazzling his very eyesight with her strange, dauntless splendour; and then she set the great rose-wreath upon her head, so crowning it.

"You came to see me," she said, the spark in her eyes growing to the size of a star; "I bid you look at me--and see how grief has faded me these past months, and how I am bowed down by it. Look well--that you may remember."

"I look," he said, almost panting.

"Then," she said, her fine-cut nostril pinching itself with her breath, as she pointed down the path before her--"go!--back to your kennel!"

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That night she appeared at the birth-night ball with the wreath of roses on her head. No other ladies wore such things, 'twas a fashion of her own; but she wore it in such beauty and with such state that it became a crown again even as it had been the first moment that she had put it on. All gazed at her as she entered, and a murmur followed her as she moved with her father up the broad oak staircase which was known through all the country for its width and massive beauty. In the hall below guests were crowded, and there were indeed few of them who did not watch her as she mounted by Sir Jeffrey's side. In the upper hall there were guests also, some walking to and fro, some standing talking, many looking down at the arrivals as they came up.

"'Tis Mistress Wildairs," these murmured as they saw her. "Clorinda, by

God!" said one of the older men to his crony who stood near him. "And crowned with roses! The vixen makes them look as if they were built of rubies in every leaf."

At the top of the great staircase there stood a gentleman, who had indeed paused a moment, spellbound, as he saw her coming. He was a man of unusual height and of a majestic mien; he wore a fair periwig, which added to his tallness; his laces and embroiderings were marvels of art and richness, and his breast blazed with orders. Strangely, she did not seem to see him; but when she reached the landing, and her face was turned so that he beheld the full blaze of its beauty, 'twas so great a wonder and revelation to him that he gave a start. The next moment almost, one of the red roses of her crown broke loose from its fastenings and fell at his very feet. His countenance changed so that it seemed almost, for a second, to lose some of its colour. He stooped and picked the rose up and held it in his hand. But Mistress Clorinda was looking at my Lord of Dunstanwolde, who was moving through the crowd to greet her. She gave him a brilliant smile, and from her lustrous eyes surely there passed something which lit a fire of hope in his.

After she had made her obeisance to her entertainers, and her birthday greetings to the young heir, he contrived to draw closely to her side and speak a few words in a tone those near her could not hear.

"To-night, madam," he said, with melting fervour, "you deign to bring me my answer as you promised."

"Yes," she murmured. "Take me where we may be a few moments alone."

He led her to an antechamber, where they were sheltered from the gaze of the passers-by, though all was moving gaiety about them. He fell upon his knee and bowed to kiss her fair hand. Despite the sobriety of his years, he was as eager and tender as a boy.

"Be gracious to me, madam," he implored. "I am not young enough to wait. Too many months have been thrown away."

"You need wait no longer, my lord," she said--"not one single hour."

And while he, poor gentleman, knelt, kissing her hand with adoring humbleness, she, under the splendour of her crown of roses, gazed down at his grey-sprinkled head with her great steady shining orbs, as if gazing at some almost uncomprehended piteous wonder.

In less than an hour the whole assemblage knew of the event and talked of it. Young men looked daggers at Dunstanwolde and at each other; and older men wore glum or envious faces. Women told each other 'twas as they had known it would be, or 'twas a wonder that at last it had come about. Upon the arm of her lord that was to be, Mistress Clorinda passed from room to room like a royal bride.

As she made her first turn of the ballroom, all eyes upon her, her beauty

blazing at its highest, Sir John Oxon entered and stood at the door. He wore his gallant air, and smiled as ever; and when she drew near him he bowed low, and she stopped, and bent lower in a curtsy sweeping the ground.

'Twas but in the next room her lord led her to a gentleman who stood with a sort of court about him. It was the tall stranger, with the fair periwig, and the orders glittering on his breast--the one who had started at sight of her as she had reached the landing of the stairs. He held still in his hand a broken red rose, and when his eye fell on her crown the colour mounted to his cheek.

"My honoured kinsman, his Grace the Duke of Osmonde," said her affianced lord. "Your Grace--it is this lady who is to do me the great honour of becoming my Lady Dunstanwolde."

And as the deep, tawny brown eye of the man bending before her flashed into her own, for the first time in her life Mistress Clorinda's lids fell, and as she swept her curtsy of stately obeisance her heart struck like a hammer against her side.