

CHAPTER IX--"I give to him the thing he craves with all his soul--myself"

In a month she was the Countess of Dunstanwolde, and reigned in her lord's great town house with a retinue of servants, her powdered lackeys among the tallest, her liveries and equipages the richest the world of fashion knew. She was presented at the Court, blazing with the Dunstanwolde jewels, and even with others her bridegroom had bought in his passionate desire to heap upon her the magnificence which became her so well. From the hour she knelt to kiss the hand of royalty she set the town on fire. It seemed to have been ordained by Fate that her passage through this world should be always the triumphant passage of a conqueror. As when a baby she had ruled the servants' hall, the kennel, and the grooms' quarters, later her father and his boisterous friends, and from her fifteenth birthday the whole hunting shire she lived in, so she held her sway in the great world, as did no other lady of her rank or any higher. Those of her age seemed but girls yet by her side, whether married or unmarried, and howsoever trained to modish ways. She was but scarce eighteen at her marriage, but she was no girl, nor did she look one, glowing as was the early splendour of her bloom. Her height was far beyond the ordinary for a woman; but her shape so faultless and her carriage so regal, that though there were men upon whom she was tall enough to look down with ease, the beholder but felt that her tallness was an added grace and beauty with which all women should have been endowed, and which, as they were not, caused them to appear but insignificant. What a throat her diamonds blazed on, what shoulders and

bosom her laces framed, on what a brow her coronet sat and glittered. Her lord lived as 'twere upon his knees in enraptured adoration. Since his first wife's death in his youth, he had dwelt almost entirely in the country at his house there, which was fine and stately, but had been kept gloomily half closed for a decade. His town establishment had, in truth, never been opened since his bereavement; and now--an elderly man--he returned to the gay world he had almost forgotten, with a bride whose youth and beauty set it aflame. What wonder that his head almost reeled at times and that he lost his breath before the sum of his strange late bliss, and the new lease of brilliant life which seemed to have been given to him.

In the days when, while in the country, he had heard such rumours of the lawless days of Sir Jeoffry Wildairs' daughter, when he had heard of her dauntless boldness, her shrewish temper, and her violent passions, he had been awed at the thought of what a wife such a woman would make for a gentleman accustomed to a quiet life, and he had indeed striven hard to restrain the desperate admiration he was forced to admit she had inspired in him even at her first ball.

The effort had, in sooth, been in vain, and he had passed many a sleepless night; and when, as time went on, he beheld her again and again, and saw with his own eyes, as well as heard from others, of the great change which seemed to have taken place in her manners and character, he began devoutly to thank Heaven for the alteration, as for a merciful boon vouchsafed to him. He had been wise enough to know that

even a stronger man than himself could never conquer or rule her; and when she seemed to begin to rule herself and bear herself as befitted her birth and beauty, he had dared to allow himself to dream of what perchance might be if he had great good fortune.

In these days of her union with him, he was, indeed, almost humbly amazed at the grace and kindness she showed him every hour they passed in each other's company. He knew that there were men, younger and handsomer than

himself, who, being wedded to beauties far less triumphant than she, found that their wives had but little time to spare them from the world, which knelt at their feet, and that in some fashion they themselves seemed to fall into the background. But 'twas not so with this woman, powerful and worshipped though she might be. She bore herself with the high dignity of her rank, but rendered to him the gracious respect and deference due both to his position and his merit. She stood by his side and not before him, and her smiles and wit were bestowed upon him as generously as to others. If she had once been a vixen, she was surely no longer, for he never heard a sharp or harsh word pass her lips, though it is true her manner was always somewhat imperial, and her lacqueys and waiting women stood in greatest awe of her. There was that in her presence and in her eye before which all commoner or weaker creatures quailed. The men of the world who flocked to pay their court to her, and the popinjays who followed them, all knew this look, and a tone in her rich voice which could cut like a knife when she chose that it should do so. But to my Lord of Dunstanwolde she was all that a worshipped lady

could be.

"Your ladyship has made of me a happier man than I ever dared to dream of being, even when I was but thirty," he would say to her, with reverent devotion. "I know not what I have done to deserve this late summer which hath been given me."

"When I consented to be your wife," she answered once, "I swore to myself that I would make one for you;" and she crossed the hearth to where he sat--she was attired in all her splendour for a Court ball, and starred with jewels--bent over his chair and placed a kiss upon his grizzled hair.

Upon the night before her wedding with him, her sister, Mistress Anne, had stolen to her chamber at a late hour. When she had knocked upon the door, and had been commanded to enter, she had come in, and closing the door behind her, had stood leaning against it, looking before her, with her eyes wide with agitation and her poor face almost grey.

All the tapers for which places could be found had been gathered together, and the room was a blaze of light. In the midst of it, before her mirror, Clorinda stood attired in her bridal splendour of white satin and flowing rich lace, a diamond crescent on her head, sparks of light flaming from every point of her raiment. When she caught sight of Anne's reflection in the glass before her, she turned and stood staring at her in wonder.

"What--nay, what is this?" she cried. "What do you come for? On my soul, you come for something--or you have gone mad."

Anne started forward, trembling, her hands clasped upon her breast, and fell at her feet with sobs.

"Yes, yes," she gasped, "I came--for something--to speak--to pray you--! Sister--Clorinda, have patience with me--till my courage comes again!" and she clutched her robe.

Something which came nigh to being a shudder passed through Mistress Clorinda's frame; but it was gone in a second, and she touched Anne--though not ungently--with her foot, withdrawing her robe.

"Do not stain it with your tears," she said "'twould be a bad omen."

Anne buried her face in her hands and knelt so before her.

"'Tis not too late!" she said--"'tis not too late yet."

"For what?" Clorinda asked. "For what, I pray you tell me, if you can find your wits. You go beyond my patience with your folly."

"Too late to stop," said Anne--"to draw back and repent."

"What?" commanded Clorinda--"what then should I repent me?"

"This marriage," trembled Mistress Anne, taking her poor hands from her face to wring them. "It should not be."

"Fool!" quoth Clorinda. "Get up and cease your grovelling. Did you come to tell me it was not too late to draw back and refuse to be the Countess of Dunstanwolde?" and she laughed bitterly.

"But it should not be--it must not!" Anne panted. "I--I know, sister, I know--"

Clorinda bent deliberately and laid her strong, jewelled hand on her shoulder with a grasp like a vice. There was no hurry in her movement or in her air, but by sheer, slow strength she forced her head backward so that the terrified woman was staring in her face.

"Look at me," she said. "I would see you well, and be squarely looked at, that my eyes may keep you from going mad. You have pondered over this marriage until you have a frenzy. Women who live alone are sometimes so, and your brain was always weak. What is it that you know. Look--in my eyes--and tell me."

It seemed as if her gaze stabbed through Anne's eyes to the very centre of her brain. Anne tried to bear it, and shrunk and withered; she would have fallen upon the floor at her feet a helpless, sobbing heap, but the

white hand would not let her go.

"Find your courage--if you have lost it--and speak plain words," Clorinda commanded. Anne tried to writhe away, but could not again, and burst into passionate, hopeless weeping.

"I cannot--I dare not!" she gasped. "I am afraid. You are right; my brain is weak, and I--but that--that gentleman--who so loved you--"

"Which?" said Clorinda, with a brief scornful laugh.

"The one who was so handsome--with the fair locks and the gallant air--"

"The one you fell in love with and stared at through the window," said Clorinda, with her brief laugh again. "John Oxon! He has victims enough, forsooth, to have spared such an one as you are."

"But he loved you!" cried Anne piteously, "and it must have been that you--you too, sister--or--or else--" She choked again with sobs, and Clorinda released her grasp upon her shoulder and stood upright.

"He wants none of me--nor I of him," she said, with strange sternness.

"We have done with one another. Get up upon your feet if you would not have me thrust you out into the corridor."

She turned from her, and walking back to her dressing-table, stood there

steadying the diadem on her hair, which had loosed a fastening when Anne tried to writhe away from her. Anne half sat, half knelt upon the floor, staring at her with wet, wild eyes of misery and fear.

"Leave your kneeling," commanded her sister again, "and come here."

Anne staggered to her feet and obeyed her behest. In the glass she could see the resplendent reflection; but Clorinda did not deign to turn towards her while she addressed her, changing the while the brilliants in her hair.

"Hark you, sister Anne," she said. "I read you better than you think. You are a poor thing, but you love me and--in my fashion--I think I love you somewhat too. You think I should not marry a gentleman whom you fancy I do not love as I might a younger, handsomer man. You are full of love, and spinster dreams of it which make you flighty. I love my Lord of Dunstanwolde as well as any other man, and better than some, for I do not hate him. He has a fine estate, and is a gentleman--and worships me. Since I have been promised to him, I own I have for a moment seen another gentleman who might--but 'twas but for a moment, and 'tis done with. 'Twas too late then. If we had met two years ago 'twould not have been so. My Lord Dunstanwolde gives to me wealth, and rank, and life at Court. I give to him the thing he craves with all his soul--myself. It is an honest bargain, and I shall bear my part of it with honesty. I have no virtues--where should I have got them from, forsooth, in a life like mine? I mean I have no women's virtues; but I have one that is



sometimes--not always--a man's. 'Tis that I am not a coward and a trickster, and keep my word when 'tis given. You fear that I shall lead my lord a bitter life of it. 'Twill not be so. He shall live smoothly, and not suffer from me. What he has paid for he shall honestly have. I will not cheat him as weaker women do their husbands; for he pays--poor gentleman--he pays."

And then, still looking at the glass, she pointed to the doorway through which her sister had come, and in obedience to her gesture of command, Mistress Anne stole silently away.