

CHAPTER XI--Wherein a noble life comes to an end

When the earl and his countess went to their house in the country, there fell to Mistress Anne a great and curious piece of good fortune. In her wildest dreams she had never dared to hope that such a thing might be.

My Lady Dunstanwolde, on her first visit home, bore her sister back with her to the manor, and there established her. She gave her a suite of rooms and a waiting woman of her own, and even provided her with a suitable wardrobe. This last she had chosen herself with a taste and fitness which only such wit as her own could have devised.

"They are not great rooms I give thee, Anne," she said, "but quiet and small ones, which you can make home-like in such ways as I know your taste lies. My lord has aided me to choose romances for your shelves, he knowing more of books than I do. And I shall not dress thee out like a peacock with gay colours and great farthingales. They would frighten thee, poor woman, and be a burden with their weight. I have chosen such things as are not too splendid, but will suit thy pale face and shot partridge eyes."

Anne stood in the middle of her room and looked about at its comforts, wondering.

"Sister," she said, "why are you so good to me? What have I done to

serve you? Why is it Anne instead of Barbara you are so gracious to?"

"Perchance because I am a vain woman and would be worshipped as you worship me."

"But you are always worshipped," Anne faltered.

"Ay, by men!" said Clorinda, mocking; "but not by women. And it may be that my pride is so high that I must be worshipped by a woman too. You would always love me, sister Anne. If you saw me break the law--if you saw me stab the man I hated to the heart, you would think it must be pardoned to me."

She laughed, and yet her voice was such that Anne lost her breath and caught at it again.

"Ay, I should love you, sister!" she cried. "Even then I could not but love you. I should know you could not strike so an innocent creature, and that to be so hated he must have been worthy of hate. You--are not like other women, sister Clorinda; but you could not be base--for you have a great heart."

Clorinda put her hand to her side and laughed again, but with less mocking in her laughter.

"What do you know of my heart, Anne?" she said. "Till late I did not

know it beat, myself. My lord says 'tis a great one and noble, but I know 'tis his own that is so. Have I done honestly by him, Anne, as I told you I would? Have I been fair in my bargain--as fair as an honest man, and not a puling, slippery woman."

"You have been a great lady," Anne answered, her great dull, soft eyes filling with slow tears as she gazed at her. "He says that you have given to him a year of Heaven, and that you seem to him like some archangel--for the lower angels seem not high enough to set beside you."

"'Tis as I said--'tis his heart that is noble," said Clorinda. "But I vowed it should be so. He paid--he paid!"

The country saw her lord's happiness as the town had done, and wondered at it no less. The manor was thrown open, and guests came down from town; great dinners and balls being given, at which all the country saw the mistress reign at her consort's side with such a grace as no lady ever had worn before. Sir Jeoffry, appearing at these assemblies, was so amazed that he forgot to muddle himself with drink, in gazing at his daughter and following her in all her movements.

"Look at her!" he said to his old boon companions and hers, who were as much awed as he. "Lord! who would think she was the strapping, handsome shrew that swore, and sang men's songs to us, and rode to the hunt in breeches."

He was awed at the thought of paying fatherly visits to her house, and would have kept away, but that she was kind to him in the way he was best able to understand.

"I am country-bred, and have not the manners of your town men, my lady," he said to her, as he sat with her alone on one of the first mornings he spent with her in her private apartment. "I am used to rap out an oath or an ill-mannered word when it comes to me. Dunstanwolde has weaned you of hearing such things--and I am too old a dog to change."

"Wouldst have thought I was too old to change," answered she, "but I was not. Did I not tell thee I would be a great lady. There is naught a man or woman cannot learn who hath the wit."

"Thou hadst it, Clo," said Sir Jeffry, gazing at her with a sort of slow wonder. "Thou hadst it. If thou hadst not--!" He paused, and shook his head, and there was a rough emotion in his coarse face. "I was not the man to have made aught but a baggage of thee, Clo. I taught thee naught decent, and thou never heard or saw aught to teach thee. Damn me!" almost with moisture in his eyes, "if I know what kept thee from going to ruin before thou wert fifteen."

She sat and watched him steadily.

"Nor I," quoth she, in answer. "Nor I--but here thou seest me, Dad--an earl's lady, sitting before thee."

"'Twas thy wit," said he, still moved, and fairly maudlin. "'Twas thy wit and thy devil's will!"

"Ay," she answered, "'twas they--my wit and my devil's will!"

She rode to the hunt with him as she had been wont to do, but she wore the latest fashion in hunting habit and coat; and though 'twould not have been possible for her to sit her horse better than of old, or to take hedges and ditches with greater daring and spirit, yet in some way every man who rode with her felt that 'twas a great lady who led the field. The horse she rode was a fierce, beauteous devil of a beast which Sir Jeffry himself would scarce have mounted even in his younger days; but she carried her loaded whip, and she sat upon the brute as if she scarcely felt its temper, and held it with a wrist of steel.

My Lord Dunstanwolde did not hunt this season. He had never been greatly fond of the sport, and at this time was a little ailing, but he would not let his lady give up her pleasure because he could not join it.

"Nay," he said, "'tis not for the queen of the hunting-field to stay at home to nurse an old man's aches. My pride would not let it be so. Your father will attend you. Go--and lead them all, my dear."

In the field appeared Sir John Oxon, who for a brief visit was at Eldershaw. He rode close to my lady, though she had naught to say to him after her first greetings of civility. He looked not as fresh and glowing with youth as had been his wont only a year ago. His reckless wildness of life and his town debaucheries had at last touched his bloom, perhaps. He had a haggard look at moments when his countenance was not lighted by excitement. 'Twas whispered that he was deep enough in debt to be greatly straitened, and that his marriage having come to naught his creditors were besetting him without mercy. This and more than this, no one knew so well as my Lady Dunstanwolde; but of a certainty she had little pity for his evil case, if one might judge by her face, when in the course of the running he took a hedge behind her, and pressing his horse, came up by her side and spoke.

"Clorinda," he began breathlessly, through set teeth.

She could have left him and not answered, but she chose to restrain the pace of her wild beast for a moment and look at him.

"Your ladyship!" she corrected his audacity. "Or--'my Lady Dunstanwolde."

"There was a time"--he said.

"This morning," she said, "I found a letter in a casket in my closet. I do not know the mad villain who wrote it. I never knew him."

"You did not," he cried, with an oath, and then laughed scornfully.

"The letter lies in ashes on the hearth," she said. "'Twas burned unopened. Do not ride so close, Sir John, and do not play the madman and the beast with the wife of my Lord Dunstanwolde."

"The wife!" he answered. "My lord! 'Tis a new game this, and well played, by God!"

She did not so much as waver in her look, and her wide eyes smiled.

"Quite new," she answered him--"quite new. And could I not have played it well and fairly, I would not have touched the cards. Keep your horse off, Sir John. Mine is restive, and likes not another beast near him;" and she touched the creature with her whip, and he was gone like a thunderbolt.

The next day, being in her room, Anne saw her come from her dressing-table with a sealed letter in her hand. She went to the bell and rang it.

"Anne," she said, "I am going to rate my woman and turn her from my service. I shall not beat or swear at her as I was wont to do with my women in time past. You will be afraid, perhaps; but you must stay with me."

She was standing by the fire with the letter held almost at arm's length in her finger-tips, when the woman entered, who, seeing her face, turned pale, and casting her eyes upon the letter, paler still, and began to shake.

"You have attended mistresses of other ways than mine," her lady said in her slow, clear voice, which seemed to cut as knives do. "Some fool and madman has bribed you to serve him. You cannot serve me also. Come hither and put this in the fire. If 'twere to be done I would make you hold it in the live coals with your hand."

The woman came shuddering, looking as if she thought she might be struck dead. She took the letter and kneeled, ashen pale, to burn it. When 'twas done, her mistress pointed to the door.

"Go and gather your goods and chattels together, and leave within this hour," she said. "I will be my own tirewoman till I can find one who comes to me honest."

When she was gone, Anne sat gazing at the ashes on the hearth. She was pale also.

"Sister," she said, "do you--"

"Yes," answered my lady. "'Tis a man who loved me, a cur and a knave. He

thought for an hour he was cured of his passion. I could have told him 'twould spring up and burn more fierce than ever when he saw another man possess me. 'Tis so with knaves and curs; and 'tis so with him. He hath gone mad again."

"Ay, mad!" cried Anne--"mad, and base, and wicked!"

Clorinda gazed at the ashes, her lips curling.

"He was ever base," she said--"as he was at first, so he is now. 'Tis thy favourite, Anne," lightly, and she delicately spurned the blackened tinder with her foot--"thy favourite, John Oxon."

Mistress Anne crouched in her seat and hid her face in her thin hands.

"Oh, my lady!" she cried, not feeling that she could say "sister," "if he be base, and ever was so, pity him, pity him! The base need pity more than all."

For she had loved him madly, all unknowing her own passion, not presuming even to look up in his beautiful face, thinking of him only as the slave of her sister, and in dead secrecy knowing strange things--strange things! And when she had seen the letter she had known the handwriting, and the beating of her simple heart had well-nigh strangled her--for she had seen words writ by him before.

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When Dunstanwolde and his lady went back to their house in town,
Mistress

Anne went with them. Clorinda willed that it should be so. She made her there as peaceful and retired a nest of her own as she had given to her at Dunstanwolde. By strange good fortune Barbara had been wedded to a plain gentleman, who, being a widower with children, needed a help-meet in his modest household, and through a distant relationship to Mistress Wimpole, encountered her charge, and saw in her meekness of spirit the thing which might fall into the supplying of his needs. A beauty or a fine lady would not have suited him; he wanted but a housewife and a mother for his orphaned children, and this, a young woman who had lived straitly, and been forced to many contrivances for mere decency of apparel and ordinary comfort, might be trained to become.

So it fell that Mistress Anne could go to London without pangs of conscience at leaving her sister in the country and alone. The stateliness of the town mansion, my Lady Dunstanwolde's retinue of lacqueys and serving-women, her little black page, who waited on her and took her pug dogs to walk, her wardrobe, and jewels, and equipages, were each and all marvels to her, but seemed to her mind so far befitting that she remembered, wondering, the days when she had darned the tattered tapestry in her chamber, and changed the ribbands and fashions of her gowns. Being now attired fittingly, though soberly as became her, she

was not in these days--at least, as far as outward seeming went--an awkward blot upon the scene when she appeared among her sister's company;

but at heart she was as timid and shrinking as ever, and never mingled with the guests in the great rooms when she could avoid so doing. Once or twice she went forth with Clorinda in her coach and six, and saw the glittering world, while she drew back into her corner of the equipage and gazed with all a country-bred woman's timorous admiration.

"'Twas grand and like a beautiful show!" she said, when she came home the first time. "But do not take me often, sister; I am too plain and shy, and feel that I am naught in it."

But though she kept as much apart from the great World of Fashion as she could, she contrived to know of all her sister's triumphs; to see her when she went forth in her bravery, though 'twere but to drive in the Mall; to be in her closet with her on great nights when her tirewomen were decking her in brocades and jewels, that she might show her highest beauty at some assembly or ball of State. And at all these times, as also at all others, she knew that she but shared her own love and dazzled admiration with my Lord Dunstanwolde, whose tenderness, being so fed by his lady's unfailing graciousness of bearing and kindly looks and words, grew with every hour that passed.

They held one night a splendid assembly at which a member of the Royal House was present. That night Clorinda bade her sister appear.

"Sometimes--I do not command it always--but sometimes you must show yourself to our guests. My lord will not be pleased else. He says it is not fitting that his wife's sister should remain unseen as if we hid her away through ungraciousness. Your woman will prepare for you all things needful. I myself will see that your dress becomes you. I have commanded it already, and given much thought to its shape and colour. I would have you very comely, Anne." And she kissed her lightly on her cheek--almost as gently as she sometimes kissed her lord's grey hair. In truth, though she was still a proud lady and stately in her ways, there had come upon her some strange subtle change Anne could not understand.

On the day on which the assembly was held, Mistress Anne's woman brought

to her a beautiful robe. 'Twas flowered satin of the sheen and softness of a dove's breast, and the lace adorning it was like a spider's web for gossamer fineness. The robe was sweetly fashioned, fitting her shape wondrously; and when she was attired in it at night a little colour came into her cheeks to see herself so far beyond all comeliness she had ever known before. When she found herself in the midst of the dazzling scene in the rooms of entertainment, she was glad when at last she could feel herself lost among the crowd of guests. Her only pleasure in such scenes was to withdraw to some hidden corner and look on as at a pageant or a play. To-night she placed herself in the shadow of a screen, from which retreat she could see Clorinda and Dunstanwolde as they received their guests. Thus she found enjoyment enough; for, in truth, her love and

almost abject passion of adoration for her sister had grown as his lordship's had, with every hour. For a season there had rested upon her a black shadow beneath which she wept and trembled, bewildered and lost; though even at its darkest the object of her humble love had been a star whose brightness was not dimmed, because it could not be so whatsoever passed before it. This cloud, however, being it seemed dispelled, the star had shone but more brilliant in its high place, and she the more passionately worshipped it. To sit apart and see her idol's radiance, to mark her as she reigned and seemed the more royal when she bent the knee to royalty itself, to see the shimmer of her jewels crowning her midnight hair and crashing the warm whiteness of her noble neck, to observe the admiration in all eyes as they dwelt upon her--this was, indeed, enough of happiness.

"She is, as ever," she murmured, "not so much a woman as a proud lovely goddess who has deigned to descend to earth. But my lord does not look like himself. He seems shrunk in the face and old, and his eyes have rings about them. I like not that. He is so kind a gentleman and so happy that his body should not fail him. I have marked that he has looked colourless for days, and Clorinda questioned him kindly on it, but he said he suffered naught."

'Twas but a little later than she had thought this, that she remarked a gentleman step aside and stand quite near without observing her. Feeling that she had no testimony to her fancifulness, she found herself thinking in a vague fashion that he, too, had come there because he chose to be

unobserved. 'Twould not have been so easy for him to retire as it had been for her smallness and insignificance to do so; and, indeed, she did not fancy that he meant to conceal himself, but merely to stand for a quiet moment a little apart from the crowd.

And as she looked up at him, wondering why this should be, she saw he was the noblest and most stately gentleman she had ever beheld.

She had never seen him before; he must either be a stranger or a rare visitor. As Clorinda was beyond a woman's height, he was beyond a man's.

He carried himself as kingly as she did nobly; he had a countenance of strong, manly beauty, and a deep tawny eye, thick-fringed and full of fire; orders glittered upon his breast, and he wore a fair periwig, which became him wondrously, and seemed to make his eye more deep and burning

by its contrast.

Beside his strength and majesty of bearing the stripling beauty of John Oxon would have seemed slight and paltry, a thing for flippant women to trifle with.

Mistress Anne looked at him with an admiration somewhat like reverence, and as she did so a sudden thought rose to her mind, and even as it rose, she marked what his gaze rested on, and how it dwelt upon it, and knew that he had stepped apart to stand and gaze as she did--only with a man's

hid fervour--at her sister's self.

'Twas as if suddenly a strange secret had been told her. She read it in his face, because he thought himself unobserved, and for a space had cast his mask aside. He stood and gazed as a man who, starving at soul, fed himself through his eyes, having no hope of other sustenance, or as a man weary with long carrying of a burden, for a space laid it down for rest and to gather power to go on. She heard him draw a deep sigh almost stifled in its birth, and there was that in his face which she felt it was unseemly that a stranger like herself should behold, himself unknowing of her near presence.

She gently rose from her corner, wondering if she could retire from her retreat without attracting his observation; but as she did so, chance caused him to withdraw himself a little farther within the shadow of the screen, and doing so, he beheld her.

Then his face changed; the mask of noble calmness, for a moment fallen, resumed itself, and he bowed before her with the reverence of a courtly gentleman, undisturbed by the unexpectedness of his recognition of her neighbourhood.

"Madam," he said, "pardon my unconsciousness that you were near me. You would pass?" And he made way for her.

She curtsayed, asking his pardon with her dull, soft eyes.

"Sir," she answered, "I but retired here for a moment's rest from the throng and gaiety, to which I am unaccustomed. But chiefly I sat in retirement that I might watch--my sister."

"Your sister, madam?" he said, as if the questioning echo were almost involuntary, and he bowed again in some apology.

"My Lady Dunstanwolde," she replied. "I take such pleasure in her loveliness and in all that pertains to her, it is a happiness to me to but look on."

Whatsoever the thing was in her loving mood which touched him and found echo in his own, he was so far moved that he answered to her with something less of ceremoniousness; remembering also, in truth, that she was a lady he had heard of, and recalling her relationship and name.

"It is then Mistress Anne Wildairs I am honoured by having speech with," he said. "My Lady Dunstanwolde has spoken of you in my presence. I am my lord's kinsman the Duke of Osmonde;" again bowing, and Anne curtsayed low once more.

Despite his greatness, she felt a kindness and grace in him which was not condescension, and which almost dispelled the timidity which, being part

of her nature, so unduly beset her at all times when she addressed or was addressed by a stranger. John Oxon, bowing his bright curls, and seeming ever to mock with his smiles, had caused her to be overcome with shy awkwardness and blushes; but this man, who seemed as far above him in person and rank and mind as a god is above a graceful painted puppet, even appeared to give of his own noble strength to her poor weakness. He bore himself towards her with a courtly respect such as no human being had ever shown to her before. He besought her again to be seated in her nook, and stood before her conversing with such delicate sympathy with her mood as seemed to raise her to the pedestal on which stood less humble women. All those who passed before them he knew and could speak easily of. The high deeds of those who were statesmen, or men honoured at Court or in the field, he was familiar with; and of those who were beauties or notable gentlewomen he had always something courtly to say.

Her own worship of her sister she knew full well he understood, though he spoke of her but little.

"Well may you gaze at her," he said. "So does all the world, and honours and adores."

He proffered her at last his arm, and she, having strangely taken courage, let him lead her through the rooms and persuade her to some refreshment. Seeing her so wondrously emerge from her chrysalis, and under the protection of so distinguished a companion, all looked at her as she passed with curious amazement, and indeed Mistress Anne was all

but overpowered by the reverence shown them as they made their way.

As they came again into the apartment wherein the host and hostess received their guests, Anne felt her escort pause, and looked up at him to see the meaning of his sudden hesitation. He was gazing intently, not at Clorinda, but at the Earl of Dunstanwolde.

"Madam," he said, "pardon me that I seem to detain you, but--but I look at my kinsman. Madam," with a sudden fear in his voice, "he is ailing--he sways as he stands. Let us go to him. Quickly! He falls!"

And, in sooth, at that very moment there arose a dismayed cry from the guests about them, and there was a surging movement; and as they pressed forward themselves through the throng, Anne saw Dunstanwolde no more above the people, for he had indeed fallen and lay outstretched and deathly on the floor.

'Twas but a few seconds before she and Osmonde were close enough to him to mark his fallen face and ghastly pallor, and a strange dew starting out upon his brow.

But 'twas his wife who knelt beside his prostrate body, waving all else aside with a great majestic gesture of her arm.

"Back! back!" she cried. "Air! air! and water! My lord! My dear lord!"

But he did not answer, or even stir, though she bent close to him and thrust her hand within his breast. And then the frightened guests beheld a strange but beautiful and loving thing, such as might have moved any heart to tenderness and wonder. This great beauty, this worshipped creature, put her arms beneath and about the helpless, awful body--for so its pallor and stillness indeed made it--and lifted it in their powerful whiteness as if it had been the body of a child, and so bore it to a couch near and laid it down, kneeling beside it.

Anne and Osmonde were beside her. Osmonde pale himself, but gently calm and strong. He had despatched for a physician the instant he saw the fall.

"My lady," he said, bending over her, "permit me to approach. I have some knowledge of these seizures. Your pardon!"

He knelt also and took the moveless hand, feeling the pulse; he, too, thrust his hand within the breast and held it there, looking at the sunken face.

"My dear lord," her ladyship was saying, as if to the prostrate man's ear alone, knowing that her tender voice must reach him if aught would--as indeed was truth. "Edward! My dear--dear lord!"

Osmonde held his hand steadily over the heart. The guests shrunk back,

stricken with terror.

There was that in this corner of the splendid room which turned faces pale.

Osmonde slowly withdrew his hand, and turning to the kneeling woman-- with

a pallor like that of marble, but with a noble tenderness and pity in his eyes--

"My lady," he said, "you are a brave woman. Your great courage must sustain you. The heart beats no more. A noble life is finished."

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The guests heard, and drew still farther back, a woman or two faintly whimpering; a hurrying lacquey parted the crowd, and so, way being made for him, the physician came quickly forward.

Anne put her shaking hands up to cover her gaze. Osmonde stood still, looking down. My Lady Dunstanwolde knelt by the couch and hid her beautiful face upon the dead man's breast.