

CHAPTER XII--Which treats of the obsequies of my Lord of Dunstanwolde, of his lady's widowhood, and of her return to town

All that remained of my Lord Dunstanwolde was borne back to his ancestral home, and there laid to rest in the ancient tomb in which his fathers slept. Many came from town to pay him respect, and the Duke of Osmonde was, as was but fitting, among them. The countess kept her own apartments, and none but her sister, Mistress Anne, beheld her.

The night before the final ceremonies she spent sitting by her lord's coffin, and to Anne it seemed that her mood was a stranger one, than ever woman had before been ruled by. She did not weep or moan, and only once kneeled down. In her sweeping black robes she seemed more a majestic creature than she had ever been, and her beauty more that of a statue than of a mortal woman. She sent away all other watchers, keeping only her sister with her, and Anne observed in her a strange protecting gentleness when she spoke of the dead man.

"I do not know whether dead men can feel and hear," she said. "Sometimes there has come into my mind--and made me shudder--the thought that, though they lie so still, mayhap they know what we do--and how they are spoken of as nothings whom live men and women but wait a moment to thrust

away, that their own living may go on again in its accustomed way, or perchance more merrily. If my lord knows aught, he will be grateful that

I watch by him to-night in this solemn room. He was ever grateful, and moved by any tenderness of mine."

'Twas as she said, the room was solemn, and this almost to awfulness. It was a huge cold chamber at best, and draped with black, and hung with hatchments; a silent gloom filled it which made it like a tomb. Tall wax-candles burned in it dimly, but adding to its solemn shadows with their faint light; and in his rich coffin the dead man lay in his shroud, his hands like carvings of yellowed ivory clasped upon his breast.

Mistress Anne dared not have entered the place alone, and was so overcome at sight of the pinched nostrils and sunk eyes that she turned cold with fear. But Clorinda seemed to feel no dread or shrinking. She went and stood beside the great funeral-draped bed of state on which the coffin lay, and thus standing, looked down with a grave, protecting pity in her face. Then she stooped and kissed the dead man long upon the brow.

"I will sit by you to-night," she said. "That which lies here will be alone to-morrow. I will not leave you this last night. Had I been in your place you would not leave me."

She sat down beside him and laid her strong warm hand upon his cold waxen

ones, closing it over them as if she would give them heat. Anne knelt and prayed--that all might be forgiven, that sins might be blotted out, that this kind poor soul might find love and peace in the kingdom of

Heaven, and might not learn there what might make bitter the memory of his last year of rapture and love. She was so simple that she forgot that no knowledge of the past could embitter aught when a soul looked back from Paradise.

Throughout the watches of the night her sister sat and held the dead man's hand; she saw her more than once smooth his grey hair almost as a mother might have touched a sick sleeping child's; again she kissed his forehead, speaking to him gently, as if to tell him he need not fear, for she was close at hand; just once she knelt, and Anne wondered if she prayed, and in what manner, knowing that prayer was not her habit.

'Twas just before dawn she knelt so, and when she rose and stood beside him, looking down again, she drew from the folds of her robe a little package.

"Anne," she said, as she untied the ribband that bound it, "when first I was his wife I found him one day at his desk looking at these things as they lay upon his hand. He thought at first it would offend me to find him so; but I told him that I was gentler than he thought--though not so gentle as the poor innocent girl who died in giving him his child. 'Twas her picture he was gazing at, and a little ring and two locks of hair--one a brown ringlet from her head, and one--such a tiny wisp of down--from the head of her infant. I told him to keep them always and look at them often, remembering how innocent she had been, and that she had died for him. There were tears on my hand when he kissed it in thanking me. He

kept the little package in his desk, and I have brought it to him."

The miniature was of a sweet-faced girl with large loving childish eyes, and cheeks that blushed like the early morning. Clorinda looked at her almost with tenderness.

"There is no marrying or giving in marriage, 'tis said," quoth she; "but were there, 'tis you who were his wife--not I. I was but a lighter thing, though I bore his name and he honoured me. When you and your child greet him he will forget me--and all will be well."

She held the miniature and the soft hair to his cold lips a moment, and Anne saw with wonder that her own mouth worked. She slipped the ring on his least finger, and hid the picture and the ringlets within the palms of his folded hands.

"He was a good man," she said; "he was the first good man that I had ever known." And she held out her hand to Anne and drew her from the room with her, and two crystal tears fell upon the bosom of her black robe and slipped away like jewels.

When the funeral obsequies were over, the next of kin who was heir came to take possession of the estate which had fallen to him, and the widow retired to her father's house for seclusion from the world. The town house had been left to her by her deceased lord, but she did not wish to return to it until the period of her mourning was over and she laid aside

her weeds. The income the earl had been able to bestow upon her made her a rich woman, and when she chose to appear again in the world it would be with the power to mingle with it fittingly.

During her stay at her father's house she did much to make it a more suitable abode for her, ordering down from London furnishings and workmen

to set her own apartments and Anne's in order. But she would not occupy the rooms she had lived in heretofore. For some reason it seemed to be her whim to have begun to have an enmity for them. The first day she entered them with Anne she stopped upon the threshold.

"I will not stay here," she said. "I never loved the rooms--and now I hate them. It seems to me it was another woman who lived in them--in another world. 'Tis so long ago that 'tis ghostly. Make ready the old red chambers for me," to her woman; "I will live there. They have been long closed, and are worm-eaten and mouldy perchance; but a great fire will warm them. And I will have furnishings from London to make them fit for habitation."

The next day it seemed for a brief space as if she would have changed even from the red chambers.

"I did not know," she said, turning with a sudden movement from a side window, "that one might see the old rose garden from here. I would not have taken the room had I guessed it. It is too dreary a wilderness,

with its tangle of briars and its broken sun-dial."

"You cannot see the dial from here," said Anne, coming towards her with a strange paleness and haste. "One cannot see within the garden from any window, surely."

"Nay," said Clorinda; "'tis not near enough, and the hedges are too high; but one knows 'tis there, and 'tis tiresome."

"Let us draw the curtains and not look, and forget it," said poor Anne. And she drew the draperies with a trembling hand; and ever after while they dwelt in the room they stayed so.

My lady wore her mourning for more than a year, and in her sombre trailing weeds was a wonder to behold. She lived in her father's house, and saw no company, but sat or walked and drove with her sister Anne, and visited the poor. The perfect stateliness of her decorum was more talked about than any levity would have been; those who were wont to gossip expecting that having made her fine match and been so soon rid of her lord, she would begin to show her strange wild breeding again, and indulge in fantastical whims. That she should wear her mourning with unflinching dignity and withdraw from the world as strictly as if she had been a lady of royal blood mourning her prince, was the unexpected thing, and so was talked of everywhere.

At the end of the eighteenth month she sent one day for Anne, who, coming

at her bidding, found her standing in her chamber surrounded by black robes and draperies piled upon the bed, and chairs, and floor, their sombreness darkening the room like a cloud; but she stood in their midst in a trailing garment of pure white, and in her bosom was a bright red rose tied with a knot of scarlet ribband, whose ends fell floating. Her woman was upon her knees before a coffer in which she was laying the weeds as she folded them.

Mistress Anne paused within the doorway, her eyes dazzled by the tall radiant shape and blot of scarlet colour as if by the shining of the sun. She knew in that moment that all was changed, and that the world of darkness they had been living in for the past months was swept from existence. When her sister had worn her mourning weeds she had seemed somehow almost pale; but now she stood in the sunlight with the rich scarlet on her cheek and lip, and the stars in her great eyes.

"Come in, sister Anne," she said. "I lay aside my weeds, and my woman is folding them away for me. Dost know of any poor creature newly left a widow whom some of them would be a help to? 'Tis a pity that so much sombreness should lie in chests when there are perhaps poor souls to whom it would be a godsend."

Before the day was over, there was not a shred of black stuff left in sight; such as had not been sent out of the house to be distributed, being packed away in coffers in the garrets under the leads.

"You will wear it no more, sister?" Anne asked once. "You will wear gay colours--as if it had never been?"

"It is as if it had never been," Clorinda answered. "Ere now her lord is happy with her, and he is so happy that I am forgot. I had a fancy that--perhaps at first--well, if he had looked down on earth--remembering--he would have seen I was faithful in my honouring of him. But now, I am sure--"

She stopped with a half laugh. "'Twas but a fancy," she said. "Perchance he has known naught since that night he fell at my feet--and even so, poor gentleman, he hath a happy fate. Yes, I will wear gay colours," flinging up her arms as if she dropped fetters, and stretched her beauteous limbs for ease--"gay colours--and roses and rich jewels--and all things--all that will make me beautiful!"

The next day there came a chest from London, packed close with splendid raiment; when she drove out again in her chariot her servants' sad-coloured liveries had been laid by, and she was attired in rich hues, amidst which she glowed like some flower new bloomed.

Her house in town was thrown open again, and set in order for her coming. She made her journey back in state, Mistress Anne accompanying her in her travelling-coach. As she passed over the highroad with her equipage and her retinue, or spent the night for rest at the best inns in the towns and villages, all seemed to know her name and state.

"'Tis the young widow of the Earl of Dunstanwolde," people said to each other--"she that is the great beauty, and of such a wit and spirit that she is scarce like a mere young lady. 'Twas said she wed him for his rank; but afterwards 'twas known she made him a happy gentleman, though she gave him no heir. She wore weeds for him beyond the accustomed time, and is but now issuing from her retirement."

Mistress Anne felt as if she were attending some royal lady's progress, people so gazed at them and nudged each other, wondered and admired.

"You do not mind that all eyes rest on you," she said to her sister; "you are accustomed to be gazed at."

"I have been gazed at all my life," my lady answered; "I scarce take note of it."

On their arrival at home they met with fitting welcome and reverence. The doors of the town house were thrown open wide, and in the hall the servants stood in line, the housekeeper at the head with her keys at her girdle, the little jet-black negro page grinning beneath his turban with joy to see his lady again, he worshipping her as a sort of fetich, after the manner of his race. 'Twas his duty to take heed to the pet dogs, and he stood holding by their little silver chains a smart-faced pug and a pretty spaniel. His lady stopped a moment to pat them and to speak to him a word of praise of their condition; and being so favoured, he spoke

also, rolling his eyes in his delight at finding somewhat to impart.

"Yesterday, ladyship, when I took them out," he said, "a gentleman marked them, knowing whose they were. He asked me when my lady came again to town, and I answered him to-day. 'Twas the fair gentleman in his own hair."

"'Twas Sir John Oxon, your ladyship," said the lacquey nearest to him.

Her ladyship left caressing her spaniel and stood upright. Little Nero was frightened, fearing she was angered; she stood so straight and tall, but she said nothing and passed on.

At the top of the staircase she turned to Mistress Anne with a laugh.

"Thy favourite again, Anne," she said. "He means to haunt me, now we are alone. 'Tis thee he comes after."