

## CHAPTER XIII--Wherein a deadly war begins

The town and the World of Fashion greeted her on her return with open arms. Those who looked on when she bent the knee to kiss the hand of Royalty at the next drawing-room, whispered among themselves that bereavement had not dimmed her charms, which were even more radiant than they had been at her presentation on her marriage, and that the mind of no man or woman could dwell on aught as mournful as widowhood in connection with her, or, indeed, could think of anything but her brilliant beauty. 'Twas as if from this time she was launched into a new life. Being rich, of high rank, and no longer an unmarried woman, her position had a dignity and freedom which there was no creature but might have envied. As the wife of Dunstanwolde she had been the fashion, and adored by all who dared adore her; but as his widow she was surrounded and besieged. A fortune, a toast, a wit, and a beauty, she combined all the things either man or woman could desire to attach themselves to the train of; and had her air been less regal, and her wit less keen of edge, she would have been so beset by flatterers and toadies that life would have been burdensome. But this she would not have, and was swift enough to detect the man whose debts drove him to the expedient of daring to privately think of the usefulness of her fortune, or the woman who manoeuvred to gain reputation or success by means of her position and power.

"They would be about me like vultures if I were weak fool enough to let them," she said to Anne. "They cringe and grovel like spaniels, and flatter till 'tis like to make one sick. 'Tis always so with toadies; they have not the wit to see that their flattery is an insolence, since it supposes adulation so rare that one may be moved by it. The men with empty pockets would marry me, forsooth, and the women be dragged into company clinging to my petticoats. But they are learning. I do not shrink from giving them sharp lessons."

This she did without mercy, and in time cleared herself of hangers-on, so that her banquets and assemblies were the most distinguished of the time, and the men who paid their court to her were of such place and fortune that their worship could but be disinterested.

Among the earliest to wait upon her was his Grace of Osmonde, who found her one day alone, save for the presence of Mistress Anne, whom she kept often with her. When the lacquey announced him, Anne, who sat upon the same seat with her, felt her slightly start, and looking up, saw in her countenance a thing she had never beheld before, nor had indeed ever dreamed of beholding. It was a strange, sweet crimson which flowed over her face, and seemed to give a wondrous deepness to her lovely orbs. She rose as a queen might have risen had a king come to her, but never had there been such pulsing softness in her look before. 'Twas in some curious fashion like the look of a girl; and, in sooth, she was but a girl in years, but so different to all others of her age, and had lived so singular a life, that no one ever thought of her but as a woman, or

would have deemed it aught but folly to credit her with any tender emotion or blushing warmth girlhood might be allowed.

His Grace was as courtly of bearing as he had ever been. He stayed not long, and during his visit conversed but on such subjects as a kinsman may graciously touch upon; but Anne noted in him a new look also, though she could scarce have told what it might be. She thought that he looked happier, and her fancy was that some burden had fallen from him.

Before he went away he bent low and long over Clorinda's hand, pressing his lips to it with a tenderness which strove not to conceal itself. And the hand was not withdrawn, her ladyship standing in sweet yielding, the tender crimson trembling on her cheek. Anne herself trembled, watching her new, strange loveliness with a sense of fascination; she could scarce withdraw her eyes, it seemed so as if the woman had been reborn.

"Your Grace will come to us again," my lady said, in a soft voice. "We are two lonely women," with her radiant compelling smile, "and need your kindly countenancing."

His eyes dwelt deep in hers as he answered, and there was a flush upon his own cheek, man and warrior though he was.

"If I might come as often as I would," he said, "I should be at your door, perhaps, with too great frequency."

"Nay, your Grace," she answered. "Come as often as we would--and see who wearies first. 'Twill not be ourselves."

He kissed her hand again, and this time 'twas passionately, and when he left her presence it was with a look of radiance on his noble face, and with the bearing of a king new crowned.

For a few moments' space she stood where he had parted from her, looking as though listening to the sound of his step, as if she would not lose a footfall; then she went to the window, and stood among the flowers there, looking down into the street, and Anne saw that she watched his equipage.

'Twas early summer, and the sunshine flooded her from head to foot; the window and balcony were full of flowers--yellow jonquils and daffodils, white narcissus, and all things fragrant of the spring. The scent of them floated about her like an incense, and a straying zephyr blew great puffs of their sweetness back into the room. Anne felt it all about her, and remembered it until she was an aged woman.

Clorinda's bosom rose high in an exultant, rapturous sigh.

"'Tis the Spring that comes," she murmured breathlessly. "Never hath it come to me before."

Even as she said the words, at the very moment of her speaking, Fate--a strange Fate indeed--brought to her yet another visitor. The door was

thrown open wide, and in he came, a lacquey crying aloud his name. 'Twas Sir John Oxon.

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Those of the World of Fashion who were wont to gossip, had bestowed upon them a fruitful subject for discussion over their tea-tables, in the future of the widowed Lady Dunstanwolde. All the men being enamoured of her, 'twas not likely that she would long remain unmarried, her period of mourning being over; and, accordingly, forthwith there was every day chosen for her a new husband by those who concerned themselves in her affairs, and they were many. One week 'twas a great general she was said to smile on; again, a great beau and female conqueror, it being argued that, having made her first marriage for rank and wealth, and being a passionate and fantastic beauty, she would this time allow herself to be ruled by her caprice, and wed for love; again, a certain marquis was named, and after him a young earl renowned for both beauty and wealth; but though each and all of those selected were known to have laid themselves at her feet, none of them seemed to have met with the favour they besought for.

There were two men, however, who were more spoken of than all the rest, and whose court awakened a more lively interest; indeed, 'twas an interest which was lively enough at times to become almost a matter of contention, for those who upheld the cause of the one man would not hear of the success of the other, the claims of each being considered of such

different nature. These two men were the Duke of Osmonde and Sir John Oxon. 'Twas the soberer and more dignified who were sure his Grace had but to proffer his suit to gain it, and their sole wonder lay in that he did not speak more quickly.

"But being a man of such noble mind, it may be that he would leave her to her freedom yet a few months, because, despite her stateliness, she is but young, and 'twould be like his honourableness to wish that she should see many men while she is free to choose, as she has never been before. For these days she is not a poor beauty as she was when she took Dunstanwolde."

The less serious, or less worldly, especially the sentimental spinsters and matrons and romantic young, who had heard and enjoyed the rumours of Mistress Clorinda Wildairs' strange early days, were prone to build much upon a certain story of that time.

"Sir John Oxon was her first love," they said. "He went to her father's house a beautiful young man in his earliest bloom, and she had never encountered such an one before, having only known country dolts and her father's friends. 'Twas said they loved each other, but were both passionate and proud, and quarrelled bitterly. Sir John went to France to strive to forget her in gay living; he even obeyed his mother and paid court to another woman, and Mistress Clorinda, being of fierce haughtiness, revenged herself by marrying Lord Dunstanwolde."

"But she has never deigned to forgive him," 'twas also said. "She is too haughty and of too high a temper to forgive easily that a man should seem to desert her for another woman's favour. Even when 'twas whispered that she favoured him, she was disdainful, and sometimes flouted him bitterly, as was her way with all men. She was never gentle, and had always a cutting wit. She will use him hardly before she relents; but if he sues patiently enough with such grace as he uses with other women, love will conquer her at last, for 'twas her first."

She showed him no great favour, it was true; and yet it seemed she granted him more privilege than she had done during her lord's life, for he was persistent in his following her, and would come to her house whether of her will or of his own. Sometimes he came there when the Duke of Osmonde was with her--this happened more than once--and then her ladyship's face, which was ever warmly beautiful when Osmonde was near, would curiously change. It would grow pale and cold; but in her eyes would burn a strange light which one man knew was as the light in the eyes of a tigress lying chained, but crouching to leap. But it was not Osmonde who felt this, he saw only that she changed colour, and having heard the story of her girlhood, a little chill of doubt would fall upon his noble heart. It was not doubt of her, but of himself, and fear that his great passion made him blind; for he was the one man chivalrous enough to remember how young she was, and to see the cruelty of the Fate which had given her unmothered childhood into the hands of a coarse rioter and debauchee, making her his plaything and his whim. And if in

her first hours of bloom she had been thrown with youthful manhood and beauty, what more in the course of nature than that she should have learned to love; and being separated from her young lover by their mutual youthful faults of pride and passionateness of temper, what more natural than, being free again, and he suing with all his soul, that her heart should return to him, even though through a struggle with pride. In her lord's lifetime he had not seen Oxon near her; and in those days when he had so struggled with his own surging love, and striven to bear himself nobly, he had kept away from her, knowing that his passion was too great and strong for any man to always hold at bay and make no sign, because at brief instants he trembled before the thought that in her eyes he had seen that which would have sprung to answer the same self in him if she had been a free woman. But now when, despite her coldness, which never melted to John Oxon, she still turned pale and seemed to fall under a restraint on his coming, a man of sufficient high dignity to be splendidly modest where his own merit was concerned, might well feel that for this there must be a reason, and it might be a grave one.

So though he would not give up his suit until he was sure that 'twas either useless or unfair, he did not press it as he would have done, but saw his lady when he could, and watched with all the tenderness of passion her lovely face and eyes. But one short town season passed before he won his prize; but to poor Anne it seemed that in its passing she lived years.

Poor woman, as she had grown thin and large-eyed in those days gone by,



she grew so again. Time in passing had taught her so much that others did not know; and as she served her sister, and waited on her wishes, she saw that of which no other dreamed, and saw without daring to speak, or show by any sign, her knowledge.

The day when Lady Dunstanwolde had turned from standing among her daffodils, and had found herself confronting the open door of her saloon, and John Oxon passing through it, Mistress Anne had seen that in her face and his which had given to her a shock of terror. In John Oxon's blue eyes there had been a set fierce look, and in Clorinda's a blaze which had been like a declaration of war; and these same looks she had seen since that day, again and again. Gradually it had become her sister's habit to take Anne with her into the world as she had not done before her widowhood, and Anne knew whence this custom came. There were times when,

by use of her presence, she could avoid those she wished to thrust aside, and Anne noted, with a cold sinking of the spirit, that the one she would plan to elude most frequently was Sir John Oxon; and this was not done easily. The young man's gay lightness of demeanour had changed. The few years that had passed since he had come to pay his courts to the young beauty in male attire, had brought experiences to him which had been bitter enough. He had squandered his fortune, and failed to reinstate himself by marriage; his dissipations had told upon him, and he had lost his spirit and good-humour; his mocking wit had gained a bitterness; his gallantry had no longer the gaiety of youth. And the woman he had loved for an hour with youthful passion, and had dared to dream of casting

aside in boyish insolence, had risen like a phoenix, and soared high and triumphant to the very sun itself. "He was ever base," Clorinda had said. "As he was at first he is now," and in the saying there was truth. If she had been helpless and heartbroken, and had pined for him, he would have treated her as a victim, and disdained her humiliation and grief; magnificent, powerful, rich, in fullest beauty, and disdaining himself, she filled him with a mad passion of love which was strangely mixed with hatred and cruelty. To see her surrounded by her worshippers, courted by the Court itself, all eyes drawn towards her as she moved, all hearts laid at her feet, was torture to him. In such cases as his and hers, it was the woman who should sue for love's return, and watch the averted face, longing for the moment when it would deign to turn and she could catch the cold eye and plead piteously with her own. This he had seen; this, men like himself, but older, had taught him with vicious art; but here was a woman who had scorned him at the hour which should have been the moment of his greatest powerfulness, who had mocked at and lashed him in the face with the high derision of a creature above law, and who never for one instant had bent her neck to the yoke which women must bear. She had laughed it to scorn--and him--and all things--and gone on her way, crowned with her scarlet roses, to wealth, and rank, and power, and adulation; while he--the man, whose right it was to be transgressor--had fallen upon hard fortune, and was losing step by step all she had won. In his way he loved her madly--as he had loved her before, and as he would have loved any woman who embodied triumph and beauty; and burning with

desire for both, and with jealous rage of all, he swore he would not be outdone, befooled, cast aside, and trampled on.

At the playhouse when she looked from her box, she saw him leaning against some pillar or stationed in some noticeable spot, his bold blue eyes fixed burningly upon her; at fashionable assemblies he made his way to her side and stood near her, gazing, or dropping words into her ear; at church he placed himself in some pew near by, that she and all the world might behold him; when she left her coach and walked in the Mall he joined her or walked behind. At such times in my lady's close-fringed eyes there shone a steady gleam; but they were ever eyes that glowed, and there were none who had ever come close enough to her to know her well, and so there were none who read its meaning. Only Anne knew as no other creature could, and looked on with secret terror and dismay. The world but said that he was a man mad with love, and desperate at the knowledge of the powerfulness of his rivals, could not live beyond sight of her.

They did not hear the words that passed between them at times when he stood near her in some crowd, and dropped, as 'twas thought, words of burning prayer and love into her ear. 'Twas said that it was like her to listen with unchanging face, and when she deigned reply, to answer without turning towards him. But such words and replies it had more than once been Anne's ill-fortune to be near enough to catch, and hearing them she had shuddered.

One night at a grand rout, the Duke of Osmonde but just having left the

reigning beauty's side, she heard the voice she hated close by her, speaking.

"You think you can disdain me to the end," it said. "Your ladyship is sure so?"

She did not turn or answer, and there followed a low laugh.

"You think a man will lie beneath your feet and be trodden upon without speaking. You are too high and bold."

She waved her painted fan, and gazed steadily before her at the crowd, now and then bending her head in gracious greeting and smiling at some passer-by.

"If I could tell the story of the rose garden, and of what the sun-dial saw, and what the moon shone on--" he said.

He heard her draw her breath sharply through her teeth, he saw her white bosom lift as if a wild beast leapt within it, and he laughed again.

"His Grace of Osmonde returns," he said; and then marking, as he never failed to do, bitterly against his will, the grace and majesty of this rival, who was one of the greatest and bravest of England's gentlemen, and knowing that she marked it too, his rage so mounted that it overcame him.

"Sometimes," he said, "methinks that I shall kill you!"

"Would you gain your end thereby?" she answered, in a voice as low and deadly.

"I would frustrate his--and yours."

"Do it, then," she hissed back, "some day when you think I fear you."

"'Twould be too easy," he answered. "You fear it too little. There are bitterer things."

She rose and met his Grace, who had approached her. Always to his greatness and his noble heart she turned with that new feeling of dependence which her whole life had never brought to her before. His deep eyes, falling on her tenderly as she rose, were filled with protecting concern. Involuntarily he hastened his steps.

"Will your Grace take me to my coach?" she said. "I am not well. May I--go?" as gently as a tender, appealing girl.

And moved by this, as by her pallor, more than his man's words could have told, he gave her his arm and drew her quickly and supportingly away.

Mistress Anne did not sleep well that night, having much to distract her

mind and keep her awake, as was often in these days the case. When at length she closed her eyes her slumber was fitful and broken by dreams, and in the mid hour of the darkness she wakened with a start as if some sound had aroused her. Perhaps there had been some sound, though all was

still when she opened her eyes; but in the chair by her bedside sat Clorinda in her night-rail, her hands wrung hard together on her knee, her black eyes staring under a brow knit into straight deep lines.

"Sister!" cried Anne, starting up in bed. "Sister!"

Clorinda slowly turned her head towards her, whereupon Anne saw that in her face there was a look as if of horror which struggled with a grief, a woe, too monstrous to be borne.

"Lie down, Anne," she said. "Be not afraid--'tis only I," bitterly--"who need fear?"

Anne cowered among the pillows and hid her face in her thin hands. She knew so well that this was true.

"I never thought the time would come," her sister said, "when I should seek you for protection. A thing has come upon me--perhaps I shall go mad--to-night, alone in my room, I wanted to sit near a woman--'twas not like me, was it?"

Mistress Anne crept near the bed's edge, and stretching forth a hand, touched hers, which were as cold as marble.

"Stay with me, sister," she prayed. "Sister, do not go! What--what can I say?"

"Naught," was the steady answer. "There is naught to be said. You were always a woman--I was never one--till now."

She rose up from her chair and threw up her arms, pacing to and fro.

"I am a desperate creature," she cried. "Why was I born?"

She walked the room almost like a thing mad and caged.

"Why was I thrown into the world?" striking her breast. "Why was I made so--and not one to watch or care through those mad years? To be given a body like this--and tossed to the wolves."

She turned to Anne, her arms outstretched, and so stood white and strange and beautiful as a statue, with drops like great pearls running down her lovely cheeks, and she caught her breath sobbingly, like a child.

"I was thrown to them," she wailed piteously, "and they harried me--and left the marks of their great teeth--and of the scars I cannot rid myself--and since it was my fate--pronounced from my first hour--why was

not this," clutching her breast, "left hard as 'twas at first? Not a woman's--not a woman's, but a she-cub's. Ah! 'twas not just--not just that it should be so!"

Anne slipped from her bed and ran to her, falling upon her knees and clinging to her, weeping bitterly.

"Poor heart!" she cried. "Poor, dearest heart!"

Her touch and words seemed to recall Clorinda to herself. She started as if wakened from a dream, and drew her form up rigid.

"I have gone mad," she said. "What is it I do?" She passed her hand across her brow and laughed a little wild laugh. "Yes," she said; "this it is to be a woman--to turn weak and run to other women--and weep and talk. Yes, by these signs I am a woman!" She stood with her clenched hands pressed against her breast. "In any fair fight," she said, "I could have struck back blow for blow--and mine would have been the heaviest; but being changed into a woman, my arms are taken from me. He who strikes, aims at my bared breast--and that he knows and triumphs in."

She set her teeth together, and ground them, and the look, which was like that of a chained and harried tigress, lit itself in her eyes.

"But there is none shall beat me," she said through these fierce shut teeth. "Nay I there is none! Get up, Anne," bending to raise her.



"Get up, or I shall be kneeling too--and I must stand upon my feet."

She made a motion as if she would have turned and gone from the room without further explanation, but Anne still clung to her. She was afraid of her again, but her piteous love was stronger than her fear.

"Let me go with you," she cried. "Let me but go and lie in your closet that I may be near, if you should call."

Clorinda put her hands upon her shoulders, and stooping, kissed her, which in all their lives she had done but once or twice.

"God bless thee, poor Anne," she said. "I think thou wouldst lie on my threshold and watch the whole night through, if I should need it; but I have given way to womanish vapours too much--I must go and be alone. I was driven by my thoughts to come and sit and look at thy good face--I did not mean to wake thee. Go back to bed."

She would be obeyed, and led Anne to her couch herself, making her lie down, and drawing the coverlet about her; after which she stood upright with a strange smile, laying her hands lightly about her own white throat.

"When I was a new-born thing and had a little throat and a weak breath," she cried, "'twould have been an easy thing to end me. I have been told I lay beneath my mother when they found her dead. If, when she felt her

breath leaving her, she had laid her hand upon my mouth and stopped mine,

I should not," with the little laugh again--"I should not lie awake to-night."

And then she went away.