

CHAPTER XIV--Containing the history of the breaking of the horse Devil, and relates the returning of his Grace of Osmonde from France

There were in this strange nature, depths so awful and profound that it was not to be sounded or to be judged as others were. But one thing could have melted or caused the unconquerable spirit to bend, and this was the overwhelming passion of love--not a slight, tender feeling, but a great and powerful one, such as could be awakened but by a being of as strong and deep a nature as itself, one who was in all things its peer.

"I have been lonely--lonely all my life," my Lady Dunstanwolde had once said to her sister, and she had indeed spoken a truth.

Even in her childhood she had felt in some strange way she stood apart from the world about her. Before she had been old enough to reason she had been conscious that she was stronger and had greater power and endurance than any human being about her. Her strength she used in these days in wilful tyranny, and indeed it was so used for many a day when she was older. The time had never been when an eye lighted on her with indifference, or when she could not rule and punish as she willed. As an infant she had browbeaten the women-servants and the stable-boys and grooms; but because of her quick wit and clever tongue, and also because no humour ever made her aught but a creature well worth looking at, they had taken her bullying in good-humour and loved her in their coarse way.

She had tyrannised over her father and his companions, and they had adored and boasted of her; but there had not been one among them whom she could have turned to if a softer moment had come upon her and she had felt the need of a friend, nor indeed one whom she did not regard privately with contempt.

A god or goddess forced upon earth and surrounded by mere human beings would surely feel a desolateness beyond the power of common words to express, and a human being endowed with powers and physical gifts so rare as to be out of all keeping with those of its fellows of ordinary build and mental stature must needs be lonely too.

She had had no companion, because she had found none like herself, and none with whom she could have aught in common. Anne she had pitied, being struck by some sense of the unfairness of her lot as compared with her own. John Oxon had moved her, bringing to her her first knowledge of buoyant, ardent youth, and blooming strength and beauty; for Dunstanwolde

she had felt gratitude and affection; but than these there had been no others who even distantly had touched her heart.

The night she had given her promise to Dunstanwolde, and had made her obeisance before his kinsman as she had met his deep and leonine eye, she had known that 'twas the only man's eye before which her own would fall and which held the power to rule her very soul.

She did not think this as a romantic girl would have thought it; it was revealed to her by a sudden tempestuous leap of her heart, and by a shock like terror. Here was the man who was of her own build, whose thews and sinews of mind and body was as powerful as her own--here was he who, had she met him one short year before, would have revolutionised her world.

In the days of her wifhood when she had read in his noble face something of that which he endeavoured to command and which to no other was apparent, the dignity of his self-restraint had but filled her with tenderness more passionate and grateful.

"Had he been a villain and a coward," was her thought, "he would have made my life a bitter battle; but 'tis me he loves, not himself only, and as I honour him so does he honour me."

Now she beheld the same passion in his eyes, but no more held in leash: his look met hers, hiding from her nothing of what his high soul burned with; and she was free--free to answer when he spoke, and only feeling one bitterness in her heart--if he had but come in time--God! why had he not been sent in time?

But, late or early, he had come; and what they had to give each other should not be mocked at and lost. The night she had ended by going to Anne's chamber, she had paced her room saying this again and again, all the strength of her being rising in revolt. She had been then a caged tigress of a verity; she had wrung her hands; she had held her palm hard

against her leaping heart; she had walked madly to and fro, battling in thought with what seemed awful fate; she had flung herself upon her knees and wept bitter scalding tears.

"He is so noble," she had cried--"he is so noble--and I so worship his nobleness--and I have been so base!"

And in her suffering her woman's nerves had for a moment betrayed her. Heretofore she had known no weakness of her sex, but the woman soul in her so being moved, she had been broken and conquered for a space, and had gone to Anne's chamber, scarcely knowing what refuge she so sought. It had been a feminine act, and she had realised all it signified when Anne sank weeping by her. Women who wept and prated together at midnight in their chambers ended by telling their secrets. So it was that it fell out that Anne saw not again the changed face to the sight of which she had that night awakened. It seemed as if my lady from that time made plans which should never for a moment leave her alone. The next day she was busied arranging a brilliant rout, the next a rich banquet, the next a great assembly; she drove in the Mall in her stateliest equipages; she walked upon its promenade, surrounded by her crowd of courtiers, smiling upon them, and answering them with shafts of graceful wit--the charm of her gaiety had never been so remarked upon, her air never so enchanting. At every notable gathering in the World of Fashion she was to be seen. Being bidden to the Court, which was at Hampton, her brilliant beauty and spirit so enlivened the royal dulness that 'twas said the Queen herself

was scarce resigned to part with her, and that the ladies and gentlemen in waiting all suffered from the spleen when she withdrew. She bought at this time the fiercest but most beautiful beast of a horse she had ever mounted. The creature was superbly handsome, but apparently so unconquerable and so savage that her grooms were afraid to approach it, and indeed it could not be saddled and bitted unless she herself stood near. Even the horse-dealer, rogue though he was, had sold it to her with some approach to a qualm of conscience, having confessed to her that it had killed two grooms, and been sentenced to be shot by its first owner, and was still living only because its great beauty had led him to hesitate for a few days. It was by chance that during these few days Lady Dunstanwolde heard of it, and going to see it, desired and bought it at once.

"It is the very beast I want," she said, with a gleam in her eye. "It will please me to teach it that there is one stronger than itself."

She had much use for her loaded riding-whip; and indeed, not finding it heavy enough, ordered one made which was heavier. When she rode the beast in Hyde Park, her first battles with him were the town talk; and there were those who bribed her footmen to inform them beforehand, when my lady was to take out Devil, that they might know in time to be in the Park to see her. Fops and hunting-men laid wagers as to whether her ladyship would kill the horse or be killed by him, and followed her training of the creature with an excitement and delight quite wild.

"Well may the beast's name be Devil," said more than one looker-on; "for he is not so much horse as demon. And when he plunges and rears and shows his teeth, there is a look in his eye which flames like her own, and 'tis as if a male and female demon fought together, for surely such a woman never lived before. She will not let him conquer her, God knows; and it would seem that he was swearing in horse fashion that she should not conquer him."

When he was first bought and brought home, Mistress Anne turned ashy at the sight of him, and in her heart of hearts grieved bitterly that it had so fallen out that his Grace of Osmonde had been called away from town by high and important matters; for she knew full well, that if he had been in the neighbourhood, he would have said some discreet and tender word of warning to which her ladyship would have listened, though she would have treated with disdain the caution of any other man or woman. When she herself ventured to speak, Clorinda looked only stern.

"I have ridden only ill-tempered beasts all my life, and that for the mere pleasure of subduing them," she said. "I have no liking for a horse like a bell-wether; and if this one should break my neck, I need battle with neither men nor horses again, and I shall die at the high tide of life and power; and those who think of me afterwards will only remember that they loved me--that they loved me."

But the horse did not kill her, nor she it. Day after day she stood by while it was taken from its stall, many a time dealing with it herself,

because no groom dare approach; and then she would ride it forth, and in Hyde Park force it to obey her; the wondrous strength of her will, her wrist of steel, and the fierce, pitiless punishment she inflicted, actually daunting the devilish creature's courage. She would ride from the encounter, through two lines of people who had been watching her--and some of them found themselves following after her, even to the Park gate--almost awed as they looked at her, sitting erect and splendid on the fretted, anguished beast, whose shining skin was covered with lather, whose mouth tossed blood-flecked foam, and whose great eye was so strangely like her own, but that hers glowed with the light of triumph, and his burned with the agonised protest of the vanquished. At such times there was somewhat of fear in the glances that followed her beauty, which almost seemed to blaze--her colour was so rich, the curve of her red mouth so imperial, the poise of her head, with its loosening coils of velvet black hair, so high.

"It is good for me that I do this," she said to Anne, with a short laugh, one day. "I was growing too soft--and I have need now for all my power. To fight with the demon in this beast, rouses all in me that I have held in check since I became my poor lord's wife. That the creature should have set his will against all others, and should resist me with such strength and devilishness, rouses in me the passion of the days when I cursed and raved and struck at those who angered me. 'Tis fury that possesses me, and I could curse and shriek at him as I flog him, if 'twould be seemly. As it would not be so, I shut my teeth hard, and shriek and curse within them, and none can hear."

Among those who made it their custom to miss no day when she went forth on Devil that they might stand near and behold her, there was one man ever present, and 'twas Sir John Oxon. He would stand as near as might be and watch the battle, a stealthy fire in his eye, and a look as if the outcome of the fray had deadly meaning to him. He would gnaw his lip until at times the blood started; his face would by turns flush scarlet and turn deadly pale; he would move suddenly and restlessly, and break forth under breath into oaths of exclamation. One day a man close by him saw him suddenly lay his hand upon his sword, and having so done, still keep it there, though 'twas plain he quickly remembered where he was.

As for the horse's rider, my Lady Dunstanwolde, whose way it had been to avoid this man and to thrust him from her path by whatsoever adroit means she could use, on these occasions made no effort to evade him and his glances; in sooth, he knew, though none other did so, that when she fought with her horse she did it with a fierce joy in that he beheld her. 'Twas as though the battle was between themselves; and knowing this in the depths of such soul as he possessed, there were times when the man would have exulted to see the brute rise and fall upon her, crushing her out of life, or dash her to the earth and set his hoof upon her dazzling upturned face. Her scorn and deadly defiance of him, her beauty and maddening charm, which seemed but to increase with every hour that flew by, had roused his love to fury. Despite his youth, he was a villain, as he had ever been; even in his first freshness there had been older



men--and hardened ones--who had wondered at the selfish mercilessness and

blackness of the heart that was but that of a boy. They had said among themselves that at his years they had never known a creature who could be so gaily a dastard, one who could plan with such light remorselessness, and using all the gifts given him by Nature solely for his own ends, would take so much and give so little. In truth, as time had gone on, men who had been his companions, and had indeed small consciences to boast of, had begun to draw off a little from him, and frequent his company less. He chose to tell himself that this was because he had squandered his fortune and was less good company, being pursued by creditors and haunted by debts; but though there was somewhat in this, perchance 'twas not the entire truth.

"By Gad!" said one over his cups, "there are things even a rake-hell fellow like me cannot do; but he does them, and seems not to know that they are to his discredit."

There had been a time when without this woman's beauty he might have lived--indeed, he had left it of his own free vicious will; but in these days, when his fortunes had changed and she represented all that he stood most desperately in need of, her beauty drove him mad. In his haunting of her, as he followed her from place to place, his passion grew day by day, and all the more gained strength and fierceness because it was so mixed with hate. He tossed upon his bed at night and cursed her; he remembered the wild past, and the memory all but drove him to delirium.

He knew of what stern stuff she was made, and that even if her love had died, she would have held to her compact like grim death, even while loathing him. And he had cast all this aside in one mad moment of boyish cupidity and folly; and now that she was so radiant and entrancing a thing, and wealth, and splendour, and rank, and luxury lay in the hollow of her hand, she fixed her beauteous devil's eyes upon him with a scorn in their black depths which seemed to burn like fires of hell.

The great brute who dashed, and plunged, and pranced beneath her seemed to have sworn to conquer her as he had sworn himself; but let him plunge and kick as he would, there was no quailing in her eye, she sat like a creature who was superhuman, and her hand was iron, her wrist was steel. She held him so that he could not do his worst without such pain as would drive him mad; she lashed him, and rained on him such blows as almost made him blind. Once at the very worst, Devil dancing near him, she looked down from his back into John Oxon's face, and he cursed aloud, her eye so told him his own story and hers. In those days their souls met in such combat as it seemed must end in murder itself.

"You will not conquer him," he said to her one morning, forcing himself near enough to speak.

"I will, unless he kills me," she answered, "and that methinks he will find it hard to do."

"He will kill you," he said. "I would, were I in his four shoes."

"You would if you could," were her words; "but you could not with his bit in your mouth and my hand on the snaffle. And if he killed me, still 'twould be he, not I, was beaten; since he could only kill what any bloody villain could with any knife. He is a brute beast, and I am that which was given dominion over such. Look on till I have done with him."

And thus, with other beholders, though in a different mood from theirs, he did, until a day when even the most sceptical saw that the brute came to the fray with less of courage, as if there had at last come into his brain the dawning of a fear of that which rid him, and all his madness could not displace from its throne upon his back.

"By God!" cried more than one of the bystanders, seeing this, despite the animal's fury, "the beast gives way! He gives way! She has him!" And John Oxon, shutting his teeth, cut short an oath and turned pale as death.

From that moment her victory was a thing assured. The duel of strength became less desperate, and having once begun to learn his lesson, the brute was made to learn it well. His bearing was a thing superb to behold; once taught obedience, there would scarce be a horse like him in the whole of England. And day by day this he learned from her, and being mastered, was put through his paces, and led to answer to the rein, so that he trotted, cantered, galloped, and leaped as a bird flies. Then as the town had come to see him fight for freedom, it came to see him adorn

the victory of the being who had conquered him, and over their dishes of tea in the afternoon beaux and beauties of fashion gossiped of the interesting and exciting event; and there were vapourish ladies who vowed they could not have beaten a brute so, and that surely my Lady Dunstanwolde must have looked hot and blowzy while she did it, and have had the air of a great rough man; and there were some pretty tiffs and even quarrels when the men swore that never had she looked so magnificent a beauty and so inflamed the hearts of all beholding her.

On the first day after her ladyship's last battle with her horse, the one which ended in such victory to her that she rode him home hard through the streets without an outbreak, he white with lather, and marked with stripes, but his large eye holding in its velvet a look which seemed almost like a human thought--on that day after there occurred a thing which gave the town new matter to talk of.

His Grace of Osmonde had been in France, called there by business of the State, and during his absence the gossip concerning the horse Devil had taken the place of that which had before touched on himself. 'Twas not announced that he was to return to England, and indeed there were those who, speaking with authority, said that for two weeks at least his affairs abroad would not be brought to a close; and yet on this morning, as my Lady Dunstanwolde rode 'neath the trees, holding Devil well in hand, and watching him with eagle keenness of eye, many looking on in wait for the moment when the brute might break forth suddenly again, a horseman was seen approaching at a pace so rapid that 'twas on the verge

of a gallop, and the first man who beheld him looked amazed and lifted his hat, and the next, seeing him, spoke to another, who bowed with him, and all along the line of loungers hats were removed, and people wore the air of seeing a man unexpectedly, and hearing a name spoken in exclamation by his side, Sir John Oxon looked round and beheld ride by my lord Duke of Osmonde. The sun was shining brilliantly, and all the Park was gay with bright warmth and greenness of turf and trees. Clorinda felt the glow of the summer morning permeate her being. She kept her watch upon her beast; but he was going well, and in her soul she knew that he was beaten, and that her victory had been beheld by the one man who knew that it meant to her that which it seemed to mean also to himself. And filled with this thought and the joy of it, she rode beneath the trees, and so was riding with splendid spirit when she heard a horse behind her, and looked up as it drew near, and the rich crimson swept over her in a sweet flood, so that it seemed to her she felt it warm on her very shoulders, 'neath her habit, for 'twas Osmonde's self who had followed and reached her, and uncovered, keeping pace by her side.

Ah, what a face he had, and how his eyes burned as they rested on her. It was such a look she met, that for a moment she could not find speech, and he himself spoke as a man who, through some deep emotion, has almost lost his breath.

"My Lady Dunstanwolde," he began; and then with a sudden passion,

"Clorinda, my beloved!" The time had come when he could not keep silence, and with great leapings of her heart she knew. Yet not one word said she, for she could not; but her beauty, glowing and quivering under his eyes' great fire, answered enough.

"Were it not that I fear for your sake the beast you ride," he said, "I would lay my hand upon his bridle, that I might crush your hand in mine. At post-haste I have come from France, hearing this thing--that you endangered every day that which I love so madly. My God! beloved, cruel, cruel woman--sure you must know!"

She answered with a breathless wild surrender. "Yes, yes!" she gasped, "I know."

"And yet you braved this danger, knowing that you might leave me a widowed man for life."

"But," she said, with a smile whose melting radiance seemed akin to tears--"but see how I have beaten him--and all is passed."

"Yes, yes," he said, "as you have conquered all--as you have conquered me--and did from the first hour. But God forbid that you should make me suffer so again."

"Your Grace," she said, faltering, "I--I will not!"

"Forgive me for the tempest of my passion," he said. "'Twas not thus I had thought to come to make my suit. 'Tis scarcely fitting that it should be so; but I was almost mad when I first heard this rumour, knowing my duty would not loose me to come to you at once--and knowing you so well, that only if your heart had melted to the one who besought you, you would give up."

"I--give up," she answered; "I give up."

"I worship you," he said; "I worship you." And their meeting eyes were drowned in each other's tenderness.

They galloped side by side, and the watchers looked on, exchanging words and glances, seeing in her beauteous, glowing face, in his joyous one, the final answer to the question they had so often asked each other.

'Twas his Grace of Osmonde who was the happy man, he and no other. That

was a thing plain indeed to be seen, for they were too high above the common world to feel that they must play the paltry part of outward trifling to deceive it; and as the sun pierces through clouds and is stronger than they, so their love shone like the light of day itself through poor conventions. They did not know the people gazed and whispered, and if they had known it, the thing would have counted for naught with them.

"See!" said my lady, patting her Devil's neck--"see, he knows that you

have come, and frets no more."

They rode homeward together, the great beauty and the great duke, and all the town beheld; and after they had passed him where he stood, John Oxon mounted his own horse and galloped away, white-lipped and with mad eyes.

"Let me escort you home," the duke had said, "that I may kneel to you there, and pour forth my heart as I have so dreamed of doing. To-morrow I must go back to France, because I left my errand incomplete. I stole from duty the time to come to you, and I must return as quickly as I came." So he took her home; and as they entered the wide hall together, side by side, the attendant lacqueys bowed to the ground in deep, welcoming obeisance, knowing it was their future lord and master they received.

Together they went to her own sitting-room, called the Panelled Parlour, a beautiful great room hung with rare pictures, warm with floods of the bright summer sunshine, and perfumed with bowls of summer flowers; and as the lacquey departed, bowing, and closed the door behind him, they turned and were enfolded close in each other's arms, and stood so, with their hearts beating as surely it seemed to them human hearts had never beat before.

"Oh! my dear love, my heavenly love!" he cried. "It has been so long--I have lived in prison and in fetters--and it has been so long!"



Even as my Lord Dunstanwolde had found cause to wonder at her gentle ways, so was this man amazed at her great sweetness, now that he might cross the threshold of her heart. She gave of herself as an empress might give of her store of imperial jewels, with sumptuous lavishness, knowing that the store could not fail. In truth, it seemed that it must be a dream that she so stood before him in all her great, rich loveliness, leaning against his heaving breast, her arms as tender as his own, her regal head thrown backward that they might gaze into the depths of each other's eyes.

"From that first hour that I looked up at you," she said, "I knew you were my lord--my lord! And a fierce pain stabbed my heart, knowing you had come too late by but one hour; for had it not been that Dunstanwolde had led me to you, I knew--ah! how well I knew--that our hearts would have beaten together not as two hearts but as one."

"As they do now," he cried.

"As they do now," she answered--"as they do now!"

"And from the moment that your rose fell at my feet and I raised it in my hand," he said, "I knew I held some rapture which was my own. And when you stood before me at Dunstanwolde's side and our eyes met, I could not understand--nay, I could scarce believe that it had been taken from me."

There, in her arms, among the flowers and in the sweetness of the sun, he lived again the past, telling her of the days when, knowing his danger, he had held himself aloof, declining to come to her lord's house with the familiarity of a kinsman, because the pang of seeing her often was too great to bear; and relating to her also the story of the hours when he had watched her and she had not known his nearness or guessed his pain, when she had passed in her equipage, not seeing him, or giving him but a gracious smile. He had walked outside her window at midnight sometimes, too, coming because he was a despairing man, and could not sleep, and returning homeward, having found no rest, but only increase of anguish. "Sometimes," he said, "I dared not look into your eyes, fearing my own would betray me; but now I can gaze into your soul itself, for the midnight is over--and joy cometh with the morning."

As he had spoken, he had caressed softly with his hand her cheek and her crown of hair, and such was his great gentleness that 'twas as if he touched lovingly a child; for into her face there had come that look which it would seem that in the arms of the man she loves every true woman wears--a look which is somehow like a child's in its trusting, sweet surrender and appeal, whatsoever may be her stateliness and the splendour of her beauty.

Yet as he touched her cheek so and her eyes so dwelt on him, suddenly her head fell heavily upon his breast, hiding her face, even while her unwreathing arms held more closely.

"Oh! those mad days before!" she cried--"Oh! those mad, mad days before!"

"Nay, they are long passed, sweet," he said, in his deep, noble voice, thinking that she spoke of the wildness of her girlish years--"and all our days of joy are yet to come."

"Yes, yes," she cried, clinging closer, yet with shuddering, "they were before--the joy--the joy is all to come."