

CHAPTER XV--In which Sir John Oxon finds again a trophy he had lost

His Grace of Osmonde went back to France to complete his business, and all the world knew that when he returned to England 'twould be to make his preparations for his marriage with my Lady Dunstanwolde. It was a marriage not long to be postponed, and her ladyship herself was known already to be engaged with lacemen, linen-drapers, toyshop women, and goldsmiths. Mercers awaited upon her at her house, accompanied by their attendants, bearing burdens of brocades and silks, and splendid stuffs of all sorts. Her chariot was to be seen standing before their shops, and the interest in her purchases was so great that fashionable beauties would contrive to visit the counters at the same hours as herself, so that they might catch glimpses of what she chose. In her own great house all was repressed excitement; her women were enraptured at being allowed the mere handling and laying away of the glories of her wardrobe; the lacqueys held themselves with greater state, knowing that they were soon to be a duke's servants; her little black Nero strutted about, his turban set upon his pate with a majestic cock, and disdained to enter into battle with such pages of his own colour as wore only silver collars, he feeling assured that his own would soon be of gold.

The World of Fashion said when her ladyship's equipage drove by, that her beauty was like that of the god of day at morning, and that 'twas plain that no man or woman had ever beheld her as his Grace of Osmonde would.

"She loves at last," a wit said. "Until the time that such a woman loves, however great her splendour, she is as the sun behind a cloud."

"And now this one hath come forth, and shines so that she warms us in mere passing," said another. "What eyes, and what a mouth, with that strange smile upon it. Whoever saw such before? and when she came to town with my Lord Dunstanwolde, who, beholding her, would have believed that she could wear such a look?"

In sooth, there was that in her face and in her voice when she spoke which almost made Anne weep, through its strange sweetness and radiance. 'Twas as if the flood of her joy had swept away all hardness and disdain. Her eyes, which had seemed to mock at all they rested on, mocked no more, but ever seemed to smile at some dear inward thought.

One night when she went forth to a Court ball, being all attired in brocade of white and silver, and glittering with the Dunstanwolde diamonds, which starred her as with great sparkling dewdrops, and yet had not the radiance of her eyes and smile, she was so purely wonderful a vision that Anne, who had been watching her through all the time when she had been under the hands of her tirewoman, and beholding her now so dazzling and white a shining creature, fell upon her knees to kiss her hand almost as one who worships.

"Oh, sister," she said, "you look like a spirit. It is as if with the earth you had naught to do--as if your eyes saw Heaven itself and Him who

reigns there."

The lovely orbs of Clorinda shone more still like the great star of morning.

"Sister Anne," she said, laying her hand on her white breast, "at times I think that I must almost be a spirit, I feel such heavenly joy. It is as if He whom you believe in, and who can forgive and wipe out sins, has forgiven me, and has granted it to me, that I may begin my poor life again. Ah! I will make it better; I will try to make it as near an angel's life as a woman can; and I will do no wrong, but only good; and I will believe, and pray every day upon my knees--and all my prayers will be that I may so live that my dear lord--my Gerald--could forgive me all that I have ever done--and seeing my soul, would know me worthy of him. Oh! we are strange things, we human creatures, Anne," with a tremulous smile; "we do not believe until we want a thing, and feel that we shall die if 'tis not granted to us; and then we kneel and kneel and believe, because we must have somewhat to ask help from."

"But all help has been given to you," poor tender Anne said, kissing her hand again; "and I will pray, I will pray--"

"Ay, pray, Anne, pray with all thy soul," Clorinda answered; "I need thy praying--and thou didst believe always, and have asked so little that has been given thee."

"Thou wast given me, sister," said Anne. "Thou hast given me a home and kindness such as I never dared to hope; thou hast been like a great star to me--I have had none other, and I thank Heaven on my knees each night for the brightness my star has shed on me."

"Poor Anne, dear Anne!" Clorinda said, laying her arms about her and kissing her. "Pray for thy star, good, tender Anne, that its light may not be quenched." Then with a sudden movement her hand was pressed upon

her bosom again. "Ah, Anne," she cried, and in the music of her voice, agony itself was ringing--"Anne, there is but one thing on this earth God rules over--but one thing that belongs--belongs to me; and 'tis Gerald Mertoun--and he is mine and shall not be taken from me, for he is a part of me, and I a part of him!"

"He will not be," said Anne--"he will not."

"He cannot," Clorinda answered--"he shall not! 'Twould not be human."

She drew a long breath and was calm again.

"Did it reach your ears," she said, reclasping a band of jewels on her arm, "that John Oxon had been offered a place in a foreign Court, and that 'twas said he would soon leave England?"

"I heard some rumour of it," Anne answered, her emotion getting the

better of her usual discreet speech. "God grant it may be true!"

"Ay!" said Clorinda, "would God that he were gone!"

But that he was not, for when she entered the assembly that night he was standing near the door as though he lay in waiting for her, and his eyes met hers with a leaping gleam, which was a thing of such exultation that to encounter it was like having a knife thrust deep into her side and through and through it, for she knew full well that he could not wear such a look unless he had some strength of which she knew not.

This gleam was in his eyes each time she found herself drawn to them, and it seemed as though she could look nowhere without encountering his gaze. He followed her from room to room, placing himself where she could not lift her eyes without beholding him; when she walked a minuet with a royal duke, he stood and watched her with such a look in his face as drew all eyes towards him.

"'Tis as if he threatens her," one said. "He has gone mad with disappointed love."

But 'twas not love that was in his look, but the madness of long-thwarted passion mixed with hate and mockery; and this she saw, and girded her soul with all its strength, knowing that she had a fiercer beast to deal with, and a more vicious and dangerous one, than her horse Devil. That he kept at first at a distance from her, and but looked on with this

secret exultant glow in his bad, beauteous eyes, told her that at last he felt he held some power in his hands, against which all her defiance would be as naught. Till this hour, though she had suffered, and when alone had writhed in agony of grief and bitter shame, in his presence she had never flinched. Her strength she knew was greater than his; but his baseness was his weapon, and the depths of that baseness she knew she had never reached.

At midnight, having just made obeisance before Royalty retiring, she felt that at length he had drawn near and was standing at her side.

"To-night," he said, in the low undertone it was his way to keep for such occasions, knowing how he could pierce her ear--"to-night you are Juno's self--a very Queen of Heaven!"

She made no answer.

"And I have stood and watched you moving among all lesser goddesses as the moon sails among the stars, and I have smiled in thinking of what these lesser deities would say if they had known what I bear in my breast to-night."

She did not even make a movement--in truth, she felt that at his next words she might change to stone.

"I have found it," he said--"I have it here--the lost treasure--the tress of hair like a raven's wing and six feet long. Is there another woman in England who could give a man a lock like it?"

She felt then that she had, in sooth, changed to stone; her heart hung without moving in her breast; her eyes felt great and hollow and staring as she lifted them to him.

"I knew not," she said slowly, and with bated breath, for the awfulness of the moment had even made her body weak as she had never known it feel before--"I knew not truly that hell made things like you."

Whereupon he made a movement forward, and the crowd about surged nearer with hasty exclamations, for the strange weakness of her body had overpowered her in a way mysterious to her, and she had changed to marble, growing too heavy of weight for her sinking limbs. And those in the surrounding groups saw a marvellous thing--the same being that my Lady Dunstanwolde swayed as she turned, and falling, lay stretched, as if dead, in her white and silver and flashing jewels at the startled beholders' feet.

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She wore no radiant look when she went home that night. She would go home alone and unescorted, excepting by her lacqueys, refusing all offers

of companionship when once placed in her equipage. There were, of course, gentlemen who would not be denied leading her to her coach; John Oxon was among them, and at the last pressed close, with a manner of great ceremony, speaking a final word.

"'Tis useless, your ladyship," he murmured, as he made his obeisance gallantly, and though the words were uttered in his lowest tone and with great softness, they reached her ear as he intended that they should. "Tomorrow morning I shall wait upon you."

Anne had forborne going to bed, and waited for her return, longing to see her spirit's face again before she slept; for this poor tender creature, being denied all woman's loves and joys by Fate, who had made her as she was, so lived in her sister's beauty and triumphs that 'twas as if in some far-off way she shared them, and herself experienced through them the joy of being a woman transcendently beautiful and transcendently beloved. To-night she had spent her waiting hours in her closet and upon her knees, praying with all humble adoration of the Being she approached. She was wont to pray long and fervently each day, thanking Heaven for the smallest things and the most common, and imploring continuance of the mercy which bestowed them upon her poor unworthiness. For her sister her prayers were offered up night and morning, and oftentimes in hours between, and to-night she prayed not for herself at all, but for Clorinda and for his Grace of Osmonde, that their love might be crowned with happiness, and that no shadow might intervene to cloud its brightness, and the



tender rapture in her sister's softened look, which was to her a thing so wonderful that she thought of it with reverence as a holy thing.

Her prayers being at length ended, she had risen from her knees and sat down, taking a sacred book to read, a book of sermons such as 'twas her simple habit to pore over with entire respect and child-like faith, and being in the midst of her favourite homily, she heard the chariot's returning wheels, and left her chair, surprised, because she had not yet begun to expect the sound.

"'Tis my sister," she said, with a soft, sentimental smile. "Osmonde not being among the guests, she hath no pleasure in mingling with them."

She went below to the room her ladyship usually went to first on her return at night from any gathering, and there she found her sitting as though she had dropped there in the corner of a great divan, her hands hanging clasped before her on her knee, her head hanging forward on her fallen chest, her large eyes staring into space.

"Clorinda! Clorinda!" Anne cried, running to her and kneeling at her side. "Clorinda! God have mercy! What is't?"

Never before had her face worn such a look--'twas colourless, and so drawn and fallen in that 'twas indeed almost as if all her great beauty was gone; but the thing most awful to poor Anne was that all the new softness seemed as if it had been stamped out, and the fierce hardness

had come back and was engraven in its place, mingled with a horrible despair.

"An hour ago," she said, "I swooned. That is why I look thus. 'Tis yet another sign that I am a woman--a woman!"

"You are ill--you swooned?" cried Anne. "I must send for your physician. Have you not ordered that he be sent for yourself? If Osmonde were here, how perturbed he would be!"

"Osmonde!" said my lady. "Gerald! Is there a Gerald, Anne?"

"Sister!" cried Anne, affrighted by her strange look--"oh, sister!"

"I have seen heaven," Clorinda said; "I have stood on the threshold and seen through the part-opened gate--and then have been dragged back to hell."

Anne clung to her, gazing upwards at her eyes, in sheer despair.

"But back to hell I will not go," she went on saying. "Had I not seen Heaven, they might perhaps have dragged me; but now I will not go--I will not, that I swear! There is a thing which cannot be endured. Bear it no woman should. Even I, who was not born a woman, but a wolf's she-cub, I cannot. 'Twas not I, 'twas Fate," she said--"'twas not I, 'twas Fate--'twas the great wheel we are bound to, which goes round and round

that we may be broken on it. 'Twas not I who bound myself there; and I will not be broken so."

She said the words through her clenched teeth, and with all the mad passion of her most lawless years; even at Anne she looked almost in the old ungentle fashion, as though half scorning all weaker than herself, and having small patience with them.

"There will be a way," she said--"there will be a way. I shall not swoon again."

She left her divan and stood upright, the colour having come back to her face; but the look Anne worshipped not having returned with it, 'twas as though Mistress Clorinda Wildairs had been born again.

"To-morrow morning I go forth on Devil," she said; "and I shall be abroad if any visitors come."

What passed in her chamber that night no human being knew. Anne, who left her own apartment and crept into a chamber near hers to lie and watch, knew that she paced to and fro, but heard no other sound, and dared not intrude upon her.

When she came forth in the morning she wore the high look she had been wont to wear in the years gone by, when she ruled in her father's house, and rode to the hunt with a following of gay middle-aged and elderly

rioters. Her eye was brilliant, and her colour matched it. She held her head with the old dauntless carriage, and there was that in her voice before which her women quaked, and her lacqueys hurried to do her bidding.

Devil himself felt this same thing in the touch of her hand upon his bridle when she mounted him at the door, and seemed to glance askance at her sideways.

She took no servant with her, and did not ride to the Park, but to the country. Once on the highroad, she rode fast and hard, only galloping straight before her as the way led, and having no intention. Where she was going she knew not; but why she rode on horseback she knew full well, it being because the wild, almost fierce motion was in keeping with the tempest in her soul. Thoughts rushed through her brain even as she rushed through the air on Devil's back, and each leaping after the other, seemed to tear more madly.

"What shall I do?" she was saying to herself. "What thing is there for me to do? I am trapped like a hunted beast, and there is no way forth."

The blood went like a torrent through her veins, so that she seemed to hear it roaring in her ears; her heart thundered in her side, or 'twas so she thought of it as it bounded, while she recalled the past and looked upon the present.

"What else could have been?" she groaned. "Naught else--naught else.  
'Twas a trick--a trick of Fate to ruin me for my punishment."

When she had gone forth it had been with no hope in her breast that her wit might devise a way to free herself from the thing which so beset her, for she had no weak fancies that there dwelt in this base soul any germ of honour which might lead it to relenting. As she had sat in her dark room at night, crouched upon the floor, and clenching her hands, as the mad thoughts went whirling through her brain, she had stared her Fate in the face and known all its awfulness. Before her lay the rapture of a great, sweet, honourable passion, a high and noble life lived in such bliss as rarely fell to lot of woman--on this one man she knew that she could lavish all the splendour of her nature, and make his life a heaven, as hers would be. Behind her lay the mad, uncared-for years, and one black memory blighting all to come, though 'twould have been but a black memory with no power to blight if the heaven of love had not so opened to her and with its light cast all else into shadow.

"If 'twere not love," she cried--"if 'twere but ambition, I could defy it to the last; but 'tis love--love--love, and it will kill me to forego it."

Even as she moaned the words she heard hoof beats near her, and a horseman leaped the hedge and was at her side. She set her teeth, and turning, stared into John Oxon's face.

"Did you think I would not follow you?" he asked.

"No," she answered.

"I have followed you at a distance hitherto," he said; "now I shall follow close."

She did not speak, but galloped on.

"Think you you can outride me?" he said grimly, quickening his steed's pace. "I go with your ladyship to your own house. For fear of scandal you have not openly rebuffed me previous to this time; for a like reason you will not order your lacqueys to shut your door when I enter it with you."

My Lady Dunstanwolde turned to gaze at him again. The sun shone on his bright falling locks and his blue eyes as she had seen it shine in days which seemed so strangely long passed by, though they were not five years ago.

"'Tis strange," she said, with a measure of wonder, "to live and be so black a devil."

"Bah! my lady," he said, "these are fine words--and fine words do not hold between us. Let us leave them. I would escort you home, and speak to you in private." There was that in his mocking that was madness to

her, and made her sick and dizzy with the boiling of the blood which surged to her brain. The fury of passion which had been a terror to all about her when she had been a child was upon her once more, and though she had thought herself freed from its dominion, she knew it again and all it meant. She felt the thundering beat in her side, the hot flood leaping to her cheek, the flame burning her eyes themselves as if fire was within them. Had he been other than he was, her face itself would have been a warning. But he pressed her hard. As he would have slunk away a beaten cur if she had held the victory in her hands, so feeling that the power was his, he exulted over the despairing frenzy which was in her look.

"I pay back old scores," he said. "There are many to pay. When you crowned yourself with roses and set your foot upon my face, your ladyship thought not of this! When you gave yourself to Dunstanwolde and spat at me, you did not dream that there could come a time when I might goad as you did."

She struck Devil with her whip, who leaped forward; but Sir John followed hard behind her. He had a swift horse too, and urged him fiercely, so that between these two there was a race as if for life or death. The beasts bounded forward, spurning the earth beneath their feet. My lady's face was set, her eyes were burning flame, her breath came short and pantingly between her teeth. Oxon's fair face was white with passion; he panted also, but strained every nerve to keep at her side, and kept there.

"Keep back! I warn thee!" she cried once, almost gasping.

"Keep back!" he answered, blind with rage. "I will follow thee to hell!"

And in this wise they galloped over the white road until the hedges disappeared and they were in the streets, and people turned to look at them, and even stood and stared. Then she drew rein a little and went slower, knowing with shuddering agony that the trap was closing about her.

"What is it that you would say to me?" she asked him breathlessly.

"That which I would say within four walls that you may hear it all," he answered. "This time 'tis not idle threatening. I have a thing to show you."

Through the streets they went, and as her horse's hoofs beat the pavement, and the passers-by, looking towards her, gazed curiously at so fine a lady on so splendid a brute, she lifted her eyes to the houses, the booths, the faces, and the sky, with a strange fancy that she looked about her as a man looks who, doomed to death, is being drawn in his cart to Tyburn tree. For 'twas to death she went, nor to naught else could she compare it, and she was so young and strong, and full of love and life, and there should have been such bliss and peace before her but for one madness of her all-unknowing days. And this beside her--this man



with the fair face and looks and beauteous devil's eyes, was her hangman, and carried his rope with him, and soon would fit it close about her neck.

When they rode through the part of the town where abode the World of Fashion, those who saw them knew them, and marvelled that the two should be together.

"But perhaps his love has made him sue for pardon that he has so borne himself," some said, "and she has chosen to be gracious to him, since she is gracious in these days to all."

When they reached her house he dismounted with her, wearing an outward air of courtesy; but his eye mocked her, as she knew. His horse was in a lather of sweat, and he spoke to a servant.

"Take my beast home," he said. "He is too hot to stand, and I shall not soon be ready."