

CHAPTER XVII--Wherein his Grace of Osmonde's courier arrives from France

The stronghold of her security lay in the fact that her household so stood in awe of her, and that this room, which was one of the richest and most beautiful, though not the largest, in the mansion, all her servitors had learned to regard as a sort of sacred place in which none dared to set foot unless invited or commanded to enter. Within its four walls she read and wrote in the morning hours, no servant entering unless summoned by her; and the apartment seeming, as it were, a citadel, none approached without previous parley. In the afternoon the doors were thrown open, and she entertained there such visitors as came with less formality than statelier assemblages demanded. When she went out of it this morning to go to her chamber that her habit might be changed and her toilette made, she glanced about her with a steady countenance.

"Until the babblers flock in to chatter of the modes and playhouses," she said, "all will be as quiet as the grave. Then I must stand near, and plan well, and be in such beauty and spirit that they will see naught but me."

In the afternoon 'twas the fashion for those who had naught more serious in their hands than the killing of time to pay visits to each other's houses, and drinking dishes of tea, to dispose of their neighbours' characters, discuss the playhouses, the latest fashions in furbelows or

commoded, and make love either lightly or with serious intent. One may be sure that at my Lady Dunstanwolde's many dishes of Bohea were drunk, and many ogling glances and much witticism exchanged. There was in these days even a greater following about her than ever. A triumphant beauty on the verge of becoming a great duchess is not like to be neglected by her acquaintance, and thus her ladyship held assemblies both gay and brilliantly varied, which were the delight of the fashionable triflers of the day.

This afternoon they flocked in greater numbers than usual. The episode of the breaking of Devil, the unexpected return of his Grace of Osmonde, the preparations for the union, had given an extra stimulant to that interest in her ladyship which was ever great enough to need none. Thereunto was added the piquancy of the stories of the noticeable demeanour of Sir John Oxon, of what had seemed to be so plain a rebellion against his fate, and also of my lady's open and cold displeasure at the manner of his bearing himself as a disappointed man who presumed to show anger against that to which he should gallantly have been resigned, as one who is conquered by the chance of war. Those who had beheld the two ride homeward together in the morning, were full of curiousness, and one and another, mentioning the matter, exchanged glances, speaking plainly of desire to know more of what had passed, and of hope that chance might throw the two together again in public, where more of interest might be gathered. It seemed indeed not unlikely that Sir John might appear among the tea-bibbers, and perchance 'twas for this lively reason that my

lady's room was this afternoon more than usually full of gay spirits and gossip-loving ones.

They found, however, only her ladyship's self and her sister, Mistress Anne, who, of truth, did not often join her tea-parties, finding them so given up to fashionable chatter and worldly witticisms that she felt herself somewhat out of place. The world knew Mistress Anne but as a dull, plain gentlewoman, whom her more brilliant and fortunate sister gave gracious protection to, and none missed her when she was absent, or observed her greatly when she appeared upon the scene. To-day she was perchance more observed than usual, because her pallor was so great a contrast to her ladyship's splendour of beauty and colour. The contrast between them was ever a great one; but this afternoon Mistress Anne's always pale countenance seemed almost livid, there were rings of pain or illness round her eyes, and her features looked drawn and pinched. My Lady Dunstanwolde, clad in a great rich petticoat of crimson flowered satin, with wondrous yellow Mechlin for her ruffles, and with her glorious hair dressed like a tower, looked taller, more goddess-like and full of splendid fire than ever she had been before beheld, or so her visitors said to her and to each other; though, to tell the truth, this was no new story, she being one of those women having the curious power of inspiring the beholder with the feeling each time he encountered them that he had never before seen them in such beauty and bloom.

When she had come down the staircase from her chamber, Anne, who had been

standing at the foot, had indeed started somewhat at the sight of her rich dress and brilliant hues.

"Why do you jump as if I were a ghost, Anne?" she asked. "Do I look like one? My looking-glass did not tell me so."

"No," said Anne; "you--are so--so crimson and splendid--and I--"

Her ladyship came swiftly down the stairs to her.

"You are not crimson and splendid," she said. "'Tis you who are a ghost. What is it?"

Anne let her soft, dull eyes rest upon her for a moment helplessly, and when she replied her voice sounded weak.

"I think--I am ill, sister," she said. "I seem to tremble and feel faint."

"Go then to bed and see the physician. You must be cared for," said her ladyship. "In sooth, you look ill indeed."

"Nay," said Anne; "I beg you, sister, this afternoon let me be with you; it will sustain me. You are so strong--let me--"

She put out her hand as if to touch her, but it dropped at her side as

though its strength was gone.

"But there will be many babbling people," said her sister, with a curious look. "You do not like company, and these days my rooms are full. 'Twill irk and tire you."

"I care not for the people--I would be with you," Anne said, in strange imploring. "I have a sick fancy that I am afraid to sit alone in my chamber. 'Tis but weakness. Let me this afternoon be with you."

"Go then and change your robe," said Clorinda, "and put some red upon your cheeks. You may come if you will. You are a strange creature Anne."

And thus saying, she passed into her apartment. As there are blows and pain which end in insensibility or delirium, so there are catastrophes and perils which are so great as to produce something near akin to these. As she had stood before her mirror in her chamber watching her reflection, while her woman attired her in her crimson flowered satin and builded up her stately head-dress, this other woman had felt that the hour when she could have shrieked and raved and betrayed herself had passed by, and left a deadness like a calm behind, as though horror had stunned all pain and yet left her senses clear. She forgot not the thing which lay staring upward blankly at the under part of the couch which hid it--the look of its fixed eyes, its outspread locks, and the purple indentation on the temple she saw as clearly as she had seen them in that

first mad moment when she had stood staring downward at the thing itself; but the coursing of her blood was stilled, the gallop of her pulses, and that wild hysteric leaping of her heart into her throat, choking her and forcing her to gasp and pant in that way which in women must ever end in shrieks and cries and sobbing beatings of the air. But for the feminine softness to which her nature had given way for the first time, since the power of love had mastered her, there was no thing of earth could have happened to her which would have brought this rolling ball to her throat, this tremor to her body--since the hour of her birth she had never been attacked by such a female folly, as she would indeed have regarded it once; but now 'twas different--for a while she had been a woman--a woman who had flung herself upon the bosom of him who was her soul's lord, and resting there, her old rigid strength had been relaxed.

But 'twas not this woman who had known tender yielding who returned to take her place in the Panelled Parlour, knowing of the companion who waited near her unseen--for it was as her companion she thought of him, as she had thought of him when he followed her in the Mall, forced himself into her box at the play, or stood by her shoulder at assemblies; he had placed himself by her side again, and would stay there until she could rid herself of him.

"After to-night he will be gone, if I act well my part," she said, "and then may I live a freed woman."

'Twas always upon the divan she took her place when she received her

visitors, who were accustomed to finding her enthroned there. This afternoon when she came into the room she paused for a space, and stood beside it, the parlour being yet empty. She felt her face grow a little cold, as if it paled, and her under-lip drew itself tight across her teeth.

"In a graveyard," she said, "I have sat upon the stone ledge of a tomb, and beneath there was--worse than this, could I but have seen it. This is no more."

When the Sir Humphreys and Lord Charleses, Lady Bettys and Mistress Lovelys were announced in flocks, fluttering and chattering, she rose from her old place to meet them, and was brilliant graciousness itself. She hearkened to their gossipings, and though 'twas not her way to join in them, she was this day witty in such way as robbed them of the dulness in which sometimes gossip ends. It was a varied company which gathered about her; but to each she gave his or her moment, and in that moment said that which they would afterwards remember. With those of the Court she talked royalty, the humours of her Majesty, the severities of her Grace of Marlborough; with statesmen she spoke with such intellect and discretion that they went away pondering on the good fortune which had befallen one man when it seemed that it was of such proportions as might have satisfied a dozen, for it seemed not fair to them that his Grace of Osmonde, having already rank, wealth, and fame, should have added to them a gift of such magnificence as this beauteous woman would bring; with

beaux and wits she made dazzling jests; and to the beauties who desired their flatteries she gave praise so adroit that they were stimulated to plume their feathers afresh and cease to fear the rivalry of her loveliness.

And yet while she so bore herself, never once did she cease to feel the presence of that which, lying near, seemed to her racked soul as one who lay and listened with staring eyes which mocked; for there was a thought which would not leave her, which was, that it could hear, that it could see through the glazing on its blue orbs, and that knowing itself bound by the moveless irons of death and dumbness it impotently raged and cursed that it could not burst them and shriek out its vengeance, rolling forth among her worshippers at their feet and hers.

"But he can not," she said, within her clenched teeth, again and again--"that he cannot."

Once as she said this to herself she caught Anne's eyes fixed helplessly upon her, it seeming to be as the poor woman had said, that her weakness caused her to desire to abide near her sister's strength and draw support from it; for she had remained at my lady's side closely since she had descended to the room, and now seemed to implore some protection for which she was too timid to openly make request.

"You are too weak to stay, Anne," her ladyship said. "'Twould be better that you should retire."



"I am weak," the poor thing answered, in low tones--"but not too weak to stay. I am always weak. Would that I were of your strength and courage. Let me sit down--sister--here." She touched the divan's cushions with a shaking hand, gazing upward wearily--perchance remembering that this place seemed ever a sort of throne none other than the hostess queen herself presumed to encroach upon.

"You are too meek, poor sister," quoth Clorinda. "'Tis not a chair of coronation or the woolsack of a judge. Sit! sit!--and let me call for wine!"

She spoke to a lacquey and bade him bring the drink, for even as she sank into her place Anne's cheeks grew whiter.

When 'twas brought, her ladyship poured it forth and gave it to her sister with her own hand, obliging her to drink enough to bring her colour back. Having seen to this, she addressed the servant who had obeyed her order.

"Hath Jenfry returned from Sir John Oxon?" she demanded, in that clear, ringing voice of hers, whose music ever arrested those surrounding her, whether they were concerned in her speech or no; but now all felt sufficient interest to prick up ears and hearken to what was said.

"No, my lady," the lacquey answered. "He said that you had bidden him to

wait."

"But not all day, poor fool," she said, setting down Anne's empty glass upon the salver. "Did he think I bade him stand about the door all night? Bring me his message when he comes."

"'Tis ever thus with these dull serving folk," she said to those nearest her. "One cannot pay for wit with wages and livery. They can but obey the literal word. Sir John, leaving me in haste this morning, I forgot a question I would have asked, and sent a lacquey to recall him."

Anne sat upright.

"Sister--I pray you--another glass of wine."

My lady gave it to her at once, and she drained it eagerly.

"Was he overtaken?" said a curious matron, who wished not to see the subject closed.

"No," quoth her ladyship, with a light laugh--"though he must have been in haste, for the man was sent after him in but a moment's time. 'Twas then I told the fellow to go later to his lodgings and deliver my message into Sir John's own hand, whence it seems that he thinks that he must await him till he comes."

Upon a table near there lay the loaded whip; for she had felt it bolder to let it lie there as if forgotten, because her pulse had sprung so at first sight of it when she came down, and she had so quailed before the desire to thrust it away, to hide it from her sight. "And that I quail before," she had said, "I must have the will to face--or I am lost." So she had let it stay.

A languishing beauty, with melting blue eyes and a pretty fashion of ever keeping before the world of her admirers her waxen delicacy, lifted the heavy thing in her frail white hand.

"How can your ladyship wield it?" she said. "It is so heavy for a woman--but your ladyship is--is not--"

"Not quite a woman," said the beautiful creature, standing at her full great height, and smiling down at this blue and white piece of frailty with the flashing splendour of her eyes.

"Not quite a woman," cried two wits at once. "A goddess rather--an Olympian goddess."

The languisher could not endure comparisons which so seemed to disparage her ethereal charms. She lifted the weapon with a great effort, which showed the slimness of her delicate fair wrist and the sweet tracery of blue veins upon it.

"Nay," she said lispingly, "it needs the muscle of a great man to lift it. I could not hold it--much less beat with it a horse." And to show how coarse a strength was needed and how far her femininity lacked such vigour, she dropped it upon the floor--and it rolled beneath the edge of the divan.

"Now," the thought shot through my lady's brain, as a bolt shoots from the sky--"now--he laughs!"

She had no time to stir--there were upon their knees three beaux at once, and each would sure have thrust his arm below the seat and rummaged, had

not God saved her! Yes, 'twas of God she thought in that terrible mad second--God!--and only a mind that is not human could have told why.

For Anne--poor Mistress Anne--white-faced and shaking, was before them all, and with a strange adroitness stooped,--and thrust her hand below, and drawing the thing forth, held it up to view.

"'Tis here," she said, "and in sooth, sister, I wonder not at its falling--its weight is so great."

Clorinda took it from her hand.

"I shall break no more beasts like Devil," she said, "and for quieter ones it weighs too much; I shall lay it by."

She crossed the room and laid it upon a shelf.

"It was ever heavy--but for Devil. 'Tis done with," she said; and there came back to her face--which for a second had lost hue--a flood of crimson so glowing, and a smile so strange, that those who looked and heard, said to themselves that 'twas the thought of Osmonde who had so changed her, which made her blush. But a few moments later they beheld the same glow mount again. A lacquey entered, bearing a salver on which lay two letters. One was a large one, sealed with a ducal coronet, and this she saw first, and took in her hand even before the man had time to speak.

"His Grace's courier has arrived from France," he said; "the package was ordered to be delivered at once."

"It must be that his Grace returns earlier than we had hoped," she said, and then the other missive caught her eye.

"'Tis your ladyship's own," the lacquey explained somewhat anxiously.

"'Twas brought back, Sir John not having yet come home, and Jenfry having waited three hours."

"'Twas long enough," quoth her ladyship. "'Twill do to-morrow."

She did not lay Osmonde's letter aside, but kept it in her hand, and

seeing that she waited for their retirement to read it, her guests began to make their farewells. One by one or in groups of twos and threes they left her, the men bowing low, and going away fretted by the memory of the picture she made--a tall and regal figure in her flowered crimson, her stateliness seeming relaxed and softened by the mere holding of the sealed missive in her hand. But the women were vaguely envious, not of Osmonde, but of her before whom there lay outspread as far as life's horizon reached, a future of such perfect love and joy; for Gerald Mertoun had been marked by feminine eyes since his earliest youth, and had seemed to embody all that woman's dreams or woman's ambitions or her love could desire.

When the last was gone, Clorinda turned, tore her letter open, and held it hard to her lips. Before she read a word she kissed it passionately a score of times, paying no heed that Anne sate gazing at her; and having kissed it so, she fell to reading it, her cheeks warm with the glow of a sweet and splendid passion, her bosom rising and falling in a tempest of tender, fluttering breaths--and 'twas these words her eyes devoured:

"If I should head this page I write to you 'Goddess and Queen, and Empress of my deepest soul,' what more should I be saying than 'My Love' and 'My Clorinda,' since these express all the soul of man could crave for or his body desire. The body and soul of me so long for thee, sweetheart, and sweetest beautiful woman that the hand of Nature ever fashioned for the joy of mortals, that I have had need to pray

Heaven's help to aid me to endure the passing of the days that lie between me and the hour which will make me the most strangely, rapturously, happy man, not in England, not in the world, but in all God's universe. I must pray Heaven again, and indeed do and will, for humbleness which shall teach me to remember that I am not deity, but mere man--mere man--though I shall hold a goddess to my breast and gaze into eyes which are like deep pools of Paradise, and yet answer mine with the marvel of such love as none but such a soul could make a woman's, and so fit to mate with man's. In the heavy days when I was wont to gaze at you from afar with burning heart, my unceasing anguish was that even high honour itself could not subdue and conquer the thoughts which leaped within me even as my pulse leaped, and even as my pulse could not be stilled unless by death. And one that for ever haunted--ay, and taunted--me was the image of how your tall, beauteous body would yield itself to a strong man's arm, and your noble head with its heavy tower of hair resting upon his shoulder--the centres of his very being would be thrilled and shaken by the uplifting of such melting eyes as surely man ne'er gazed within on earth before, and the ripe and scarlet bow of a mouth so beauteous and so sweet with womanhood. This beset me day and night, and with such torture that I feared betimes my brain might reel and I become a lost and ruined madman. And now--it is no more forbidden me to dwell upon it--nay, I lie waking at night, wooing the picture to me, and at times I rise from my dreams to kneel by my bedside and thank God that He hath given me at last what surely is my own!--for so it seems to me, my love, that each of us is but a part of the other, and that such forces of Nature

rush to meet together in us, that Nature herself would cry out were we rent apart. If there were aught to rise like a ghost between us, if there were aught that could sunder us--noble soul, let us but swear that it shall weld us but the closer together, and that locked in each other's arms its blows shall not even make our united strength to sway. Sweetest lady, your lovely lip will curve in smiles, and you will say, 'He is mad with his joy--my Gerald' (for never till my heart stops at its last beat and leaves me still, a dead man, cold upon my bed, can I forget the music of your speech when you spoke those words, 'My Gerald! My Gerald.') And indeed I crave your pardon, for a man so filled with rapture cannot be quite sane, and sometimes I wonder if I walk through the palace gardens like one who is drunk, so does my brain reel. But soon, my heavenly, noble love, my exile will be over, and this is in truth what my letter is to tell you, that in four days your lacqueys will throw open your doors to me and I shall enter, and being led to you, shall kneel at your feet and kiss the hem of your robe, and then rise standing to fold her who will so soon be my very wife to my throbbing breast."

Back to her face had come all the softness which had been lost, the hard lines were gone, the tender curves had returned, her lashes looked as if they were moist. Anne, sitting rigidly and gazing at her, was afraid to speak, knowing that she was not for the time on earth, but that the sound of a voice would bring her back to it, and that 'twas well she should be away as long as she might.



She read the letter, not once, but thrice, dwelling upon every word, 'twas plain; and when she had reached the last one, turning back the pages and beginning again. When she looked up at last, 'twas with an almost wild little smile, for she had indeed for that one moment forgotten.

"Locked in each other's arms," she said--"locked in each other's arms. My Gerald! My Gerald! 'What surely is my own--my own!'"

Anne rose and came to her, laying her hand on her arm. She spoke in a voice low, hushed, and strained.

"Come away, sister," she said, "for a little while--come away."