

CHAPTER VII

"'Tis Clo Wildairs, Man--All the County Knows the Vixen."

A month later he went to Warwickshire at my Lord Dunstanwolde's invitation. In that part of the county which borders upon Gloucestershire was his Lordship's seat, which was known as Dunstan's Wolde. 'Twas an ancient and beautiful estate, and his Lordship spent his quiet and secluded life upon it, much beloved by his tenantry, and respected by his neighbours. Since his young wife's death his manner of living had become more secluded year after year; his library, his memories, and the administration of his estates filled his days with quiet occupation.

"Perhaps I am a selfish fellow to ask a young gentleman who is a favourite at Court to come and bury himself with me," he said to Roxholm the night of his arrival, "but you and I have spent many a good quiet hour together, Gerald," laying an affectionate hand upon his broad shoulder. "And if you were my son you would come, I know."

"Think of me as your son," said Roxholm with his fine smile. "A man is the richer for the love of two fathers."

"Oxford has not changed you, Roxholm," said the Earl. "Nor have the Court ladies' flatteries spoiled your kindly manners. We shall be happy

together, for awhile at least."

They were indeed happy, spending their days much as they had spent them at Camylott--riding together, taking long sauntering walks, reading old books and new ones, and in these days conversing on maturer subjects. There was indeed much to talk of at this closing of a reign which had been full of struggles with problems affecting not only England but all the European powers. What the Peace of Ryswick had effected, what the death of Charles of Spain would bring, whether Louis would play fairly, how long King William's broken frame would last, what the power of the Marlboroughs would be when the Princess Anne came to the throne--all these things they discussed together, and in their arguments my Lord Dunstanwolde was often roused to the wonder other ripe minds had felt in coming in contact with the activity and daring of this younger one.

"'Tis not possible to hide a handsome young nobleman under a bushel," the Earl said after but a few days had passed. "The neighbours will have you to dine, and dance, and hunt with them, whether it is your will or not. A strapping young fellow must do his duty by the world."

Roxholm performed his duty with propriety and spirit when it was not to be evaded gracefully. He dined with country gentlemen, and listened to their songs and stories until most of them drank themselves under the table, as was the spirited fashion of the time. He answered the questionings of their wives on subjects pertaining to Court fashions and behaviour and,--perhaps somewhat gravely,--danced attendance on the

daughters, who most of them, it is true, were used to less courtly manners and voted him in private far too grave and majestic for such a beauty.

"He hath a way of bowing that would give one a fright, were his eyes not so handsome and his smile so sweet," said one lovely ardent hoyden.

"Lord! just to watch him standing near with that noble grave look on his face, and not giving one a thought, makes one's heart go pit-a-pat. A man hath no right to be such a beauty--and to be so, and to be a Duke's son, too, is a burning shame. 'Tis wicked that one man should have so much to give to one woman."

'Twas but a week before Roxholm left his kinsman's house, that they spent a day together hunting with a noted pack over the borders of Gloucestershire. The sport was in a neighbourhood where the gentry were hunting-mad, and chased foxes as many days of the week as fortune and weather favoured them.

"'Tis a rough country," said my Lord Dunstanwolde, as they rode forth, "and some of those who hunt are wild livers and no credit to their rank, but there is fine old blood among them, and some of the hardest riders and boldest leapers England knows." Suddenly he seemed to remember something and turned with an exclamation. "Upon my soul!" he said, "till this moment I had forgot. I am too sober an old fogy to hunt with them when I have no young blood near to spur me. Sir Jeffery Wildairs will be with them--if he has not yet broke his neck."

The country they hunted over proved indeed rough, and the sport exciting. Roxholm had never seen wilder riding and more daring leaps, and it had also happened that he had not yet gone a-hunting with so boisterous and rollicking a body of gentlemen. Their knowledge of dogs, foxes, and horseflesh was plainly absolute, but they had no Court manners, being of that clan of country gentry of which London saw but little. Nearly all the sportsmen were big men and fine ones, with dare-devil bearing, loud voices, and a tendency to loose and profane language. They roared friendly oaths at each other, had brandy flasks on their persons on which they pulled freely, and, their spirits being heightened thereby, exchanged jokes and allusions not too seemly.

Before the fox was found, Roxholm had marked this and observed also that half a dozen more of the best mounted men were the roughest on the field, being no young scapegraces and frolickers, but men past forty, who wore the aspect of reprobate livers and hard drinkers, and who were plainly boon companions and more intimate with each other than with those not of their party.

They seemed to form a band of themselves, which those not of it had an air of avoiding, and 'twas to be seen that their company was looked at askance, and that in the bearing of each member of the group there was a defiance of the general opinion. Roxholm sat on his horse somewhat apart from this group watching it, his kinsman and a certain Lord Twemlow, who was their host for the day, conversing near him.

My Lord Twemlow, who took no note of them, but by the involuntary casting on them of an occasional glance, when some wild outburst attracted his attention, wore a grave and almost affronted look.

"'Tis the Wildairs cronies," Roxholm heard him say to his Lordship of Dunstanwolde. "I hunt but seldom, purely through disgust of their unseemliness."

"Wildairs!" exclaimed my Lord Dunstanwolde.

"Ay," answered Twemlow, turning his horse slightly and averting his eyes; "and there cometh my reputable kinsman, Sir Jeffry, even as we speak."

Roxholm turned to look with some stir of feeling in his breast, since this was the man who had so early roused in him an emotion of anger and rebellion. Across the field came pounding a great black horse, a fine big-boned brute; on him rode a tall, heavy man who must once have been of the handsomest, since even yet, in spite of years, bloated face, and careless attire, he retained a sort of dissolute beauty. He was of huge frame and had black eyes, a red mouth, and wore his own thick and curling though grizzled black hair.

He rode with a dare-devil grace, and his cronies greeted him with a shout.

"He has the look of it," thought Roxholm, remembering the old stories; but the next instant he gave a start. Across the field beyond, another rider followed galloping, and at this moment came over the high hedge like a swallow, and, making the leap, gave forth a laughing shout. Roxholm sat and stared at the creature. 'Twas indeed a youthful figure, brilliant and curious to behold in this field of slovenly clad sportsmen. 'Twas a boy of twelve or thereabouts riding a splendid young devil of a hunter, with a skin like black satin and a lovely, dangerous eye. The lad was in scarlet, and no youngster of the Court was more finely clad or fitted, and not one had Roxholm ever set eyes upon whose youthful body and limbs were as splendid in line and symmetry; in truth, the beauty and fire of him were things to make a man lose his breath. He rode as if he had been born upon his horse's back and had never sat elsewhere from his first hour, his flowing-black hair was almost too rich and long for a boy, he had a haughty mouth for a child, though it was a crimson bow and pouting, his complexion matched it, and his black eyes, which were extraordinary big and flashing, had the devil in them.

"Pardi!" the young Marquess cried between his teeth. "What does such a young one in such company?" Never had he beheld a thing which moved him with such strange suddenness of emotion. He could not have explained the reason of his feeling, which was an actual excitement, and caused him to turn in his saddle to watch the boy's every movement as he galloped forward to join the reprobate group.

As they had greeted Sir Jeffry with a shout of welcome, so they greeted the young newcomer, but in his reception there was more enthusiasm and laughter, as if there were some special cause for gayety in the mere sight of him.

When he drew up in their midst their voices broke forth into a tumult of noisy, frolicsome greeting, to which the lad gave back impudent, laughing answer. In a moment's time he was the centre figure of interest among them, and seemed to dominate them all as if he had been some young potentate instead of a mere handsome lad of twelve.

"If they were a band of barbarians and he their boy chief they could pay him no more court nor joy in him more," Roxholm reflected. "Is it his beauty or--what means it?"

He could not withdraw his eyes from the boy, who sat his fretting hunter among them, sometimes scarcely able to restrain the animal's fiery temper or keep him from lashing out his heels orbiting at the beasts nearest to him. Now he trotted from one man to the other as the group scattered somewhat; now he sat half turned back, his hand on his steed's hind quarters, flinging words and laughter to the outside man.

"Thou'lt have to use scissors again on thy periwig, ecod!" one man cried, banteringly.

"Damme, yes," the youngster rapped out, and he caught a rich lock of his hair and drew it forward to look at it, frowning. "What's a man to do when his hair grows like a girl's?"

The answer was greeted with a shout of laughter, and the boy burst forth with a laugh likewise, showing two rows of ivory teeth. Somehow there was an imperial deviltry about him, an impudent wild spirit which had plainly made him conqueror, favourite, and plaything of the whole disreputable crew.

Men were not fastidious talkers in those times; the cleanest mouthed of them giving themselves plenty of license when they were in spirits.

Roxholm had heard broad talk enough at the University, where the young gentlemen indulged in conversation no more restrained than was that of their elders and betters; he had heard the jokes and profanity of both camp and Court since he had left Oxford, and had learned that squeamishness was far from being the fashion. But never had he heard such oath-sprinkled talk or such open obscenity of joking as fell upon his ears this morning in but a brief space. Hearing it in spite of himself, his blood grew hot and his horse began to paw the earth, he, in his irritation, having unknowingly fretted its mouth. And then one of the company, an elderly sportsman with a watery eye, began a story.

"Good God!" Roxholm broke forth to the man nearest to him, one not of the party, but evidently one who found it diverting; "good God! Can they not restrain themselves before a child? Let them be decent for his

mere youth's sake! The lad is not thirteen."

The man started and stared at him a moment with open mouth, and then burst into a loud guffaw of laughter.

"The lad!" he cried, roaring and slapping his thigh in his mirth. "'Tis no lad. Didst take it for one? Lord! 'tis Jeoff Wildair's youngest wench. 'Tis Clo--'tis Clo, man. All the county knows the vixen!"

And at that very instant the hounds sprang forth, giving tongue, and the field sprang forward with them, and all was wild excitement: cries of "Tally ho!" ringing, horses plunging, red coats seeming to fly through the air; and my lord Marquess went with the field, his cheek hot, his heart suddenly thumping in his breast with a sense of he knew not what, as his eye, following a slender, scarlet-coated figure, saw it lift its horse for a huge leap over a five-barred gate, take it like a bird, and lead the whole scurrying, galloping multitude.

"Yes," said my Lord Dunstanwolde, as they rode homeward slowly in the evening gray, "'tis the girl infant who was found struggling and shrieking beneath the dead body of her mother, and till to-day I never saw her. Good Heavens! the beauty of the creature--the childish deviltry and fire!"

Each turned and looked into the eyes of the other with a question in

his thought, and each man's was the same, though one had lived beyond sixty years and one but twenty-four. A female creature of such beauty, of such temper, bred in such manner, among such companions, by such parents--what fate could be before her? Roxholm averted his eyes.

"Tossed to the wolves," he said; "tossed to the pack--to harry and to slaver over! God's mercy!"

As they rode he heard the story, Lord Twemlow having related such incidents as he naturally knew to my Lord Dunstanwolde. 'Twas a bitter history to Twemlow, whose kinsman the late Lady Wildairs had been, and who was a discreetly sober and God-fearing gentleman, to whom irregular habits and the reckless squandering of fortune were loathly things. And this was the substance of the relation, which was so far out of the common as to be almost monstrous: His disgust at the birth of this ninth girl infant had so inflamed Sir Jeffry that he had refused even to behold it and had left it to its fate as if it had been an ill-made, blind puppy. But two of her Ladyship's other children had survived their infancy, and of these two their father knew nothing whatever but that they had been called Barbara and Anne, that they showed no promise of beauty, and lived their bare little lives in the Hall's otherwise deserted west wing, having as their sole companion and instructress a certain Mistress Margery Wimpole--a timorous poor relation, who had taken the position in the wretched household to save herself from starvation, and because she was fitted for no other; her education being so poor and her understanding so limited, that no reputable or

careful family would have accepted her as governess or companion. Her two poor little charges learned the few things she could teach them, and their meek spiritedness gave her but little trouble. Their dead mother's suffering and their father's rough contempt on the rare occasions when he had chanced to behold them had chastened them to humbleness from their babyhood. There was none who wanted them, none who served or noticed them, and there was no circumstance which could not restrain them, no person who was not their ruler if 'twas his will.

"But the ninth one was not like them," said my Lord. "The blood of the fierce devils who were the chiefs of her house centuries ago woke in her veins at her birth. 'Tis strange indeed, Gerald, how such things break forth--or slumber--in a race. Should you trace Wildairs, as you trace Mertoun through the past, her nature would be made clear enough. They have been splendid devils, some of them--devils who fought, shrieking with ferocious laughter in the face of certain horrible death; devils whose spirit no torture of rack or flame could conquer; beings who could endure in silence horrors almost supernatural; who could bear more, revel more, suffer more, defy more than any other human thing."

"And this child is one of them!" said Roxholm.

He said but little as they rode onward and he listened. There was within him a certain distaste for what seemed to him the unnatural tumult of his feelings. A girl child of twelve rollicking in boys'

clothes was not a pleasing picture, but in one sense a tragic one, and certainly not such as should set a man's heart beating and his cheek to flame when he heard stories of her fantastic life and character. On this occasion he did not understand himself; if he had been a sanctimonious youngster he would have reproved his own seeming levity, but he was not so, and frankly felt himself restless and ill at ease.

The name given to her had been Clorinda, and from her babyhood she had been as tempestuous as her sisters were mild. None could manage her. Her baby training left wholly to neglected and loose-living servants, she had spent her first years in kitchens, garrets, and stables. The stables and the stable-boys, the kennels and their keepers, were loved better than aught else. She learned to lisp the language of grooms' and helpers, she cursed and swore as they did, she heard their songs and stories, and was as familiar with profanity and obscene language as other children are with nursery rhymes. Until she was five years old Sir Jeffry never set eyes upon her. Then a strange chance threw her in his way and sealed her fate.

Straying through the house, having escaped from her woman, the child had reached the big hall, and sate upon the floor playing with a powder-flask she had found. 'Twas Sir Jeffry's, and he, coming upon her, not knowing her for his own offspring (not that such a knowledge would have calmed his passion), he sprang upon her with curses and soundly trounced her. Either of her sisters Anne or Barbara would have been convulsed with terror, but this one was only roused to a fury as

much greater for her size than Sir Jeffry was bigger than herself. She flew at him and poured forth oaths, she shrieked at him and beat his legs with his own crop, which she caught up from the floor where it lay within reach, she tore at him with tooth and nail, and with such strength and infant fearlessness as arrested him in his frenzy and caused him to burst forth laughing as if he had gone mad.

"From that hour she was a doomed creature," my Lord ended. "What else can a man call the poor beauteous, helpless thing. She is his companion and playmate, and the toy and jest of his comrades. It is the scandal of the county. At twelve she is as near a woman as other girls of fourteen. At fifteen--!" and he stopped speaking.

"'Twould have been safer for her to have died beneath her dead mother's body," said Roxholm, almost fiercely.

"Yes, safer!" said his Lordship. "Yet what a woman!--What a woman!--and here he broke off speech again.