

## CHAPTER XIII

"Your--Grace!"

"Come with me, Gerald, to Dunstan's Wolde," said my lord, as they sat together that night in his town-house. "I would have your company if you will give it me until you rejoin Marlborough. I am lonely in these days."

His lordship did not look his usual self, seeming, Roxholm thought, worn and sometimes abstracted. He was most kind and affectionate, and there was in his manner a paternal tenderness and sympathy which the young man was deeply touched by. If it had been possible for him to have spoken to any living being of the singular mental disturbance he had felt beginning in him of late, he could have confessed it to Lord Dunstanwolde. But nature had created in him a tendency to silence and reserve where his own feelings were concerned. As to most human beings there is a consolation in pouring forth the innermost secret thoughts at times, to him there was support in the knowledge that he held all within his own breast and could reflect upon his problems in sacred privacy. At this period, indeed, his feelings were such as he could scarcely have described to any one. He was merely conscious of a sort of unrest and of being far from comprehending his own emotions. They were, indeed, scarcely definite enough to be called emotions, but only seemed shadows hovering about him and causing him vaguely to wonder at

their existence. He was neither elated nor depressed, but found himself confronting fancies he had not confronted before, and at times regarding the course of events with something of the feeling of a fatalist. There was a thing it seemed from which he could not escape, yet in his deepest being was aware that he would have preferred to avoid it. No man wishes to encounter unhappiness; he was conscious remotely that this preference for avoidance arose from a vaguely defined knowledge that in one direction there lay possibilities of harsh suffering and pain.

"'Tis a strange thing," he said to himself, "how I seem forbid by Fate to avoid the path of this strange wild creature. My Lord Marlborough brings her up to me at his quarters, I leave them; and going to my own, meet with Tantillion and his letter; I enter a coffee-house and hear wild talk of her; I go to my own house and my mother paints a picture of her which stirs my very depths; I walk in the streets of London and am dragged aside to find myself gazing at her portrait; I leave it, and meet my Lord Dunstanwolde, who prays me to go to Warwickshire, where I shall be within a few miles of her and may encounter her any hour. What will come next?"

That which came next was not unlike what had gone before. On their journey to Warwickshire my Lord Dunstanwolde did not speak of the lovely hoyden, whereat Roxholm somewhat wondered, as his lordship had but lately left her neighbourhood and her doings seemed the county's scandal; but 'tis true that on their journey he conversed little and

seemed full of thought.

"Do not think me dull, Gerald," he said; "'tis only that of late I have begun to feel that I am an older man than I thought--perhaps too old to be a fit companion for youth. An old fellow should not give way to fancies. I--I have been giving way."

"Nay, nay, my dear lord," said Roxholm with warm feeling, "'tis to fancy you should give way--and 'tis such as you who are youths' best companions, since you bring to those of fewer years ripeness which is not age, maturity which is not decay. What man is there of twenty-eight with whom I could ride to the country with such pleasure as I feel to-day. You have lived too much alone of late. 'Tis well I came to Warwickshire."

This same evening after they had reached their journey's end, on descending to the saloon before dinner, his guest found my lord standing before the portrait of his lost wife and gazing at it with a strange tender intentness, his hands behind his back. He turned at Roxholm's entrance, and there were shadows in his eyes.

"Such an one as she," he said, "would forgive a man--even if he seemed false--and would understand. But none could be false to her--or forget." And so speaking walked away, the portrait seeming to follow him with its young flower-blue eyes.

'Twas the same evening Lord Twemlow rode over from his estate to spend the night with them, and they were no sooner left with their wine than he broke forth into confidence and fretting.

"I wanted to talk to thee, Edward," he said to Dunstanwolde (they had been boys together). "I am so crossed these days that I can scarce bear my own company. 'Tis that young jade again, and I would invent some measures to be taken."

"Ay, 'tis she again, I swear," had passed through Roxholm's mind as he looked at his wineglass, and that instant his lordship turned on him almost testily to explain.

"I speak of a kinswoman who is the bane and disgrace of my life, as she would be the bane and disgrace of any gentleman who was of her family," he said. "A pretty fool and baby who was my cousin married a reprobate, Jeof Wildairs, and this is his daughter and is a shameless baggage. Egad! you must have seen her on the hunting-field when you were with us--riding in coat and breeches and with her mane of hair looped under her hat."

"I saw her," Roxholm answered--and it seemed to him that as he spoke he beheld again the scarlet figure fly over the hedge on its young devil of a horse--and felt his heart leap as the horse did.

My Lord Dunstanwolde looked grave and pushed his glass back and forth

on the mahogany. Glancing at him Roxholm thought his cheek had flushed, as if he did not like the subject. But Twemlow went on, growing hotter.

"One day in the field," he said, "it broke from its loop--her hair--and fell about her like a black mantle, streaming over her horse's back, and a sight it was--and damn it, so was she; and every man in the field shouting with pleasure or laughter. And she snatched her hat off with an oath and sat there as straight as a dart, but in a fury and winding her coils up, with her cheeks as scarlet as her coat and cursing like a young vagabond stable-boy between her teeth."

Dunstanwolde moved suddenly and almost upset his glass, but Roxholm took his up and drained it with an unmoved countenance.

But he could see her sitting in her black hair, and could see, too, the splendid scarlet on her angry cheek, and her eyes flashing wickedly.

"Tis not decent," cried Lord Twemlow, striking the table with his hand. "If the baggage were not what she is, it would be bad enough, but there is not a woman in England built so. 'Tis well Charles Stuart is not on the throne, or she would outdo any Castlemaine that ever ruled him. And 'tis well that Louis is in France and that Maintenon keeps him sober. She might retrieve her house's fortunes and rule at Court a Duchess; but what decent man will look at her with her Billingsgate and her breeches? A nice lady she would make for a gentleman! Any modest snub-nosed girl would be better. There is scarce a week passes she does

not set the country by the ears with some fury or frolic. One time 'tis clouting a Chaplain till his nose bleeds; next 'tis frightening some virtuous woman of fashion into hysteric swooning with her impudent flaming tongue. The women hate her, and she pays them out as she only can. Lady Maddon had fits for an hour, after an encounter with her, in their meeting by chance one day at a mercer's in the county town. She has the wit of a young she-devil and the temper of a tigress, and is so tall, and towers so that she frightens them out of their senses."

My lord Marquess looked at him across the table.

"She is young," he said, "she is beautiful. Is there no man who loves her who can win her from her mad ways?"

"Man!" cried Twemlow, raging, "every scoundrel and bumpkin in the shire is mad after her, but she knows none who are not as bad as she--and they tell me she laughs her wild, scornful laugh at each of them and looks at him--standing with her hands in her breeches pockets and her legs astride, and mocks as if she were some goddess instead of a mere strapping, handsome vixen. 'There is not one of ye,' she says, 'not one among ye who is man and big enough!' Such impudence was never yet in woman born! And the worst on't is, she is right--damn her!--she's right."

"Yes," said my Lord Dunstanwolde with a clouded face. "'Tis a Man who would win her--young and beautiful and strong--strong!"

"She needs a master!" cried Twemlow.

"Nay," said Roxholm--"a mate."

"Mate, good Lord!" cried Twemlow, again turning to stare at him. "A master, say I."

"'Tis a barbaric fancy," said Roxholm thoughtfully as he turned the stem of his glass, keeping his eyes fixed on it as though solving a problem for himself. "A barbaric fancy that a woman needs a master. She who is strong enough is her own conqueror--as a man should be master of himself."

"No gentleman will take her if she does not mend her ways," Lord Twemlow said, hotly; "and with all these country rakes about her she will slip--as more decently bred girls have. All eyes are set upon her, waiting for it. She has so drawn every gaze upon her, that her scandal will set ablaze a light that will flame like a beacon-fire from a hill-top. She will repent her bitterly enough then. None will spare her. She will be like a hare let loose with every pack in the county set upon her to hunt her to her death."

"Ah!"--the exclamation broke forth as if involuntarily from my Lord Dunstanwolde, and Roxholm, turning with a start, saw that he had suddenly grown pale.

"You are ill!" he cried. "You have lost colour!"

"No! No!" his lordship answered hurriedly, and faintly smiling. "'Tis over! 'Twas but a stab of pain." And he refilled his glass with wine and drank it.

"You live too studious a life, Ned," said Twemlow. "You have looked but poorly this month or two."

"Do not let us speak of it," Lord Dunstanwolde answered, a little hurried, as before. "What--what is it you think to do--or have you yet no plan?"

"If she begins her fifteenth year as she has lived the one just past," said my lord, ruffling his periwig in his annoyance, "I shall send my Chaplain to her father to give him warning. We are at such odds that if I went myself we should come to blows, and I have no mind either to be run through or to drive steel through his thick body. He would have her marry, I would swear, and counts on her making as good a match as she can make without going to Court, where he cannot afford to take her. I shall lay command on Twichell to put the case clear before him--that no gentleman will pay her honourable court while he so plays the fool as to let her be the scandal of Gloucestershire--aye, and of Worcestershire and Warwickshire to boot. That may stir his liquor-sodden brain and set him thinking."



"How--will she bear it?" asked his Lordship of Dunstanwolde. "Will not her spirit take fire that she should be so reprov'd?"

"'Twill take fire enough, doubtless--and be damned to it!" replied my Lord Twemlow, hotly. "She will rage and rap out oaths like a trooper, but if Jeof Wildairs is the man he used to be, he will make her obey him, if he chooses--or he will break her back."

"'Twould be an awful battle," said Roxholm, "between a will like hers and such a brute as he, should her choice not be his."

"Ay, he is a great blackguard," commented Twemlow, coolly enough. "England scarcely holds a bigger than Jeoffry Wildairs, and he has had the building of her, body and soul."

'Twas not alone my Lord Twemlow who talked of her, but almost every other person, so it seemed. Oftenest she was railed at and condemned, the more especially if there were women in the party discussing her; but 'twas to be marked that at such times as men were congregated and talked of her faults and beauties, more was said of her charms than her sins. They fell into relating their stories of her, even the soberest of them, as if with a sense of humour in them, as indeed the point of such anecdotes was generally humorous because of a certain piquant boldness and lawless wild spirit shown in them. The story of the

Chaplain, Roxholm heard again, and many others as fantastic. The retorts of this young female Ishmael upon her detractors and assailers, on such rare occasions as she encountered them, were full of a wit so biting and so keen that they were more than any dared to face when it could be avoided. But she was so bold and ingenious, and so ready with devices, that few could escape her. Her companionship with her father's cronies had given her a curious knowledge of the adventures which took place in three counties, at least, and her brain was so alert and her memory so unusual that she was enabled to confront an enemy with such adroitly arranged circumstantial evidence that more than one poor beauty would far rather have faced a loaded cannon than found herself within the immediate neighbourhood of the mocking and flashing eyes. Her meeting in the mercer's shop with the fair "Willow Wand," Lady Maddon, had been so full of spirited and pungent truth as to drive her ladyship back to London after her two hours' fainting fits were over.

"Look you, my lady," she had ended, in her clear, rich girl-voice--and to every word she uttered the mercer and his shopmen and boys had stood listening behind their counters or hid round bales of goods, all grinning as they listened--"I know all your secrets as I know the secrets of other fine ladies. I know and laugh at them because they show you to be such fools. They are but fine jokes to me. My morals do not teach me to pray for you or blame you. Your tricks are your own business, not another woman's, and I would have told none of them--not one--if you had not lied about me. I am not a woman in two things: I wear breeches and I know how to keep my mouth shut as well as if 'twere

padlocked; but you lied about me when you told the story of young Lockett and me. 'Twas a damned lie, my lady. Had it been true none would have known of it, and he must have been a finer man--with more beauty and more wit. But as for the thing I tell you of Sir James--and your meeting at----"

But here the fragile "Willow Wand" shrieked and fell into her first fit, not having strength to support herself under the prospect of hearing the story again with further and more special detail.

"I hear too much of her," Roxholm said to himself at last. "She is in the air a man breathes, and seems to get into his veins and fly to his brain." He suddenly laughed a short laugh, which even to himself had a harsh sound. "'Tis time I should go back to Flanders," he said, "and rejoin his Grace of Marlborough."

He had been striding over the hillsides all morning with his gun over his shoulder, and had just before he spoke thrown himself down to rest. He had gone out alone, his mood pleasing itself best with solitude, and had lost his way and found himself crossing strange land. Being wearied and somewhat out of sorts, he had flung himself down among the heather and bracken, where he was well out of sight, and could lie and look up at the gray of the sky, his hands clasped beneath his head.

"Yes, 'twill be as well that I go back to Flanders," he said again, somewhat gloomily; and as he spoke he heard voices on the fall of the

hill below him, and glancing down through the gorse bushes, saw approaching his resting-place four sportsmen who looked as fatigued as himself.

He did not choose to move, thinking they would pass him, and as they came nearer he recognised them one by one, having by this time been long enough in the neighbourhood to have learned both names and faces. They were of the Wildairs crew, and one man's face enlightened him as to whose estate he trespassed upon, the owner of the countenance being a certain Sir Christopher Crowell, a jolly drunken dog whose land he had heard was somewhere in the neighbourhood. The other two men were a Lord Eldershawe and Sir Jeffry Wildairs himself, while the tall stripling with them 'twas easy to give a name to, though she strode over the heather with her gun on her shoulder and as full a game-bag as if she had been a man--it being Mistress Clorinda, in corduroy and with her looped hair threatening to break loose and hanging in disorder about her glowing face. They were plainly in gay humour, though wearied, and talked and laughed noisily as they came.

"We have tramped enough," cried Sir Jeffry, "and bagged birds enough for one morning. 'Tis time we rested our bones and put meat and drink in our bellies."

He flung himself down upon the heather and the other men followed his example. Mistress Clo, however, remaining standing, at first leaning upon her gun.

My lord Marquess gazed down at her from his ledge and shut his teeth in anger at the mounting of the blood to his cheek and its unseemly burning there.

"I will stay where I am and look at her, at least," he said. "To be looked at does no woman harm, and to look at one can harm no man--if he be going to Flanders."

That which disturbed him most was his realising that he always thought of her as a woman--and also that she was a woman and no child. 'Twas almost impossible to believe she was no older than was said, when one beheld her height and youthful splendour of body and bearing. He knew no woman of twenty as tall as she and shaped with such strength and fineness. Her head was set so on her long throat and her eyes so looked out from under her thick jet lashes, that in merely standing erect she seemed to command and somewhat disdain; but when she laughed, her red lips curling, her little strong teeth gleaming, and her eyes opening and flashing mirth, she was the archest, most boldly joyous creature a man had ever beheld. Her morning's work on the moors had made her look like young Nature's self, her cheek was burnt rich-brown and crimson, her disordered hair twined in big rough rings about her forehead, her movements were as light, alert, and perfect as if she had been a deer or any wild thing of the woods or fields. There was that about her that made Roxholm feel that she must exhale in breath and hair and garments the scent of gorse and heather and fern and summer rains.

As one man gazed at her so did the others, though they were his elders and saw her often, while he was but twenty-eight and had beheld her but once before.

Each man of the party took from his pouch a small but well-filled packet of food and a flask, and fell to upon their contents voraciously, talking as they worked their jaws and joking with Mistress Clo. She also brought forth her own package, which held bread and meat, and a big russet apple, upon she set with a fine appetite. 'Twas good even to see her eat, she did it with such healthy pleasure, as a young horse might have taken his oats or a young setter his supper after a day in the cover.

"Thou'rt not tired, Clo!" cries Eldershawe, laughing, as she fell upon her russet apple, biting into it crisply, and plainly with the pleasure of a hungry child.

"Not I, good Lord!" she answered. "Could shoot over as many miles again."

"When thou'rt fifty years old, wilt not be so limber and have such muscles," said Sir Jeoffry.

"She hath not so long to wait," said the third man, grinning. "Wast not fourteen in November, Clo? Wilt soon be a woman."

She bit deep into her fruit and stared out over the moors below.

"Am not going to be a woman," she said. "I hate them."

"They hate thee," said Eldershawe, with a chuckle, "and will hate thee worse when thou wearest brocades and a farthingale."

"I have watched them," proceeded Mistress Clo. "They cannot keep their mouths shut. If they have a secret they must tell it, whether 'tis their own or another's. They clack, they tell lies, they cry and scream out if they are hurt; but they will hurt anything which cannot hurt them back. They run and weep to each other when they are in love and a man slights them. They have no spirit and no decency." She said it with such an earnest solemnness that her companions shouted with laughter.

"She sits in her breeches--the unruliest baggage in Gloucestershire," cried Eldershawe, "and complains that fine ladies are not decent. What would they say if they heard thee?"

"They may hear me when they will," said Mistress Clo, springing to her feet with a light jump and sending the last of her apple whizzing into space with a boyish throw. "'Tis I who am the modest woman--for all my breeches and manners. I do not see indecency where there is none--for the mere pleasure of ogling and bridling and calling attention to my simpering. I should have seen no reason for airs and graces if I had

been among those on the bank when the fine young Marquess we heard of saved the boat-load on the river and gave orders for the reviving of the drowned man--in his wet skin. When 'tis spoke of--for 'tis a favourite story--that little beast Tantillion hides her face behind her fan and cries, 'Oh, Lud! thank Heaven I was not near. I should have swooned away at the very sight.'"

She imitated the affected simper of a girl in such a manner that the three sportsmen yelled with delight, and Roxholm himself gnawed his lip to check an involuntary break into laughter.

"What didst say to her the day she bridled over it at Knepton, when the young heir was there?" said Crowell, grinning. "I was told thou disgraced thyself, Clo. What saidst thou?"

She was standing her full straight height among them and turned, with her hands in her pockets and a grave face.

"My blood was hot," she answered. "I said, 'Damn thee for a lying little fool!' That thou wouldst not!"

And the men who lay on the ground roared till they rolled there, and Roxholm gnawed his lip again, though not all from mirth, for there was in his mind another thing. She did not laugh but stood in the same position, but now looking out across the country spread below.



"I shall love no man who will scorn me," she continued in her mellow voice; "but if I did I would be burned alive at the stake before I would open my lips about it. And I would be burned alive at the stake before I would play tricks with my word or break my promise when 'twas given. Women think they can swear a thing and unswear it, to save or please themselves. They give themselves to a man and then repent it and are slippery. If I had given myself, and found I had been a fool, I would keep faith. I would play no tricks--even though I learned to hate him. No, I will not be a woman."

And she picked up her gun and strode away, and seeing this they rose all three by one accord, as if she were their chieftain, and followed her.

After they were gone my lord Marquess did not move for some time, but lay still among the gorse and bracken at his full length, his hands clasped behind his head. He gazed up into the grey sky with the look of a man whose thoughts are deep and strange. But at last he rose, and picking up his gun, shouldered it and strode forth on his way back to Dunstan's Wolde, which was miles away.

"Yes," he said, speaking aloud to himself, "I will go back and follow his Grace of Marlborough for a while on his campaign--but in two years' time I will come back--to Gloucestershire--and see what time has wrought."

But to Flanders he did not go, nor did my Lord Duke of Marlborough see him for many a day, for Fate, which had so long steadily driven him, had ordained it otherwise. When he reached Dunstan's Wolde, on crossing the threshold, something in the faces of the lacqueys about the entrance curiously attracted his attention. He thought each man he glanced at or spoke to looked agitated and as if there were that on his mind which so scattered his wits that he scarce knew how to choose his speech. The younger ones stammered and, trying to avoid his eye, seemed to step out of his view as hastily as possible. Those of maturer years wore grave and sorrowful faces, and when, on passing through the great hall upon which opened the library and drawing-rooms he encountered the head butler, the man started back and actually turned pale.

"What has happened?" his lordship demanded, his wonder verging in alarm. "Something has come about, surely. What is it, man? Tell me! My Lord Dunstanwolde--"

The man was not one whose brain worked quickly. 'Twas plain he lost his wits, being distressed for some reason beyond measure. He stepped to the door of the library and threw it open.

"My--my lord awaits your--your lordship--Grace," and then in an uncertain and low voice he announced him in the following strange manner:

"His--lordship--his Grace--has returned, my lord," he said.

And Roxholm, suddenly turning cold and pale himself, and seized upon by a horror of he knew not what, saw as in a dream my lord Dunstanwolde advancing towards him, his face ashen with woe, tears on his cheeks, his shaking hands outstretched as if in awful pity.

"My poor Gerald," he broke forth, one hand grasping his, one laid on his shoulder. "My poor lad--God help me--that I am no more fit to break to you this awful news."

"For God's sake!" cried Gerald, and sank into the chair my lord drew him to, where he sat himself down beside him, the tears rolling down his lined cheeks.

"Both--both your parents!" he cried. "God give me words! Both--both! At Pisa where they had stopped--a malignant fever. Your mother first--and within twelve hours your father! Praise Heaven they were not parted. Gerald, my boy!"

My lord Marquess leaned forward, his elbow sank on his knee, his forehead fell heavily upon his palm and rested there. He felt as if a blow had been struck upon his head, which he moved slowly, seeing nothing before him.

"Both! Both!" he murmured. "The happiest woman in England! Have you

been happy? I would hear you say it again--before I leave you! Ay," shaking his head, "that was why the poor fool said, 'Your Grace.'"