CHAPTER XVI

A Rumour

Through the passing of two years Osmonde's foot did not press English soil again, and his existence during that period was more vivid and changeful than it had ever been before. He saw Ramillies follow Blenheim, great Marlborough attain the height of renown, and French Louis's arrogant ambitions end in downfall and defeat. Life in both camp and Court he knew at its highest tension, brilliant scenes he beheld, strange ones, wicked ones, and lived a life so eventful and full of motion and excitement that there were few men who through its picturesque adventures would have been like to hold in mind one image and one thought. Yet this he did, telling himself that 'twas the thought which held him, not he the thought, it having been proven in the past 'twas one which would not have released him from its dominion even had he been inclined to withdraw himself from it. And this he was not. Nature had so built him, that on the day when he had found himself saying, "In two years' time I will come back to Gloucestershire and see what time has wrought," he had reached a point from which there was no retreating. Through many an hour in time past there had been turmoil in his mind, but in a measure, at least, this ended the uncertainties, and was no rash outburst but a resolve. It had not been made lightly, but had been like a plant which had grown from a seed, long hidden in dark earth and slowly fructifying till at last summer rain and warming sun

had caused it to burst forth from its prison, a thing promising full fruit and flower. For long he had not even known the seed was in the soil; he had felt its stirrings before he had believed in its existence, and then one day the earth had broke and he had seen its life and known what its strength might be. 'Twould be of wondrous strength, he knew, and of wondrous beauty if no frost should blight nor storm uproot it.

In its freedom from all tendency to plaything-sentiments and trivial romances, his youth had been unlike the youth of other men. Being man and young, he had known temptation, but had disdained it; being also proud and perhaps haughty in his fastidiousness, and being strong, he had thrust base and light things aside. He had held in his brain a fancy from his boyhood, and singularly enough it had but grown stronger and become more fully formed with his own strength and increase of years. 'Twas a strange fancy indeed to fit the time he lived in, but 'twas his choice. The woman whose eyes held the answer to the question his own soul asked, and whose being asked the question to which his own replied, would bring great and deep joy to him--others did not count in his existence--and for her he had waited and longed, sometimes so fiercely, that he wondered if he was in the wrong and but following a haunting, mocking dream.

"You are an epicure, Osmonde," his Grace of Marlborough said more than once, for he had watched and studied him closely. "Not an anchorite but an epicure."

"Yes," answered Osmonde, "perhaps 'tis that. Any man can love a score of women--most men do--but there are few who can love but one, as I shall, if--" and the words came slowly--"if I ever find her."

"You may not," remarked his Grace.

"I may not," said Osmonde, and he smiled his faint, grim smile.

He could not have sworn when he returned to the Continent that he had found her absolutely at last. Her body he had found, but herself he had not approached nearly enough to know. But this thing he realised, that even in the mad stories he had heard, when they had been divested of their madness, the chief figure in them had always stood out an honest, strong, fair thing, dwarfed by no petty feminine weakness, nor follies, nor spites. Rules she broke, decorums she defied, but in such manner as hurt none but herself. She played no tricks and laid no plots for vengeance, as she might well have done; she but went her daring, lawless way, with her head up and her great eyes wide open; and 'twas her fearless frankness and just, clear wit which moved him more than aught else, since 'twas they which made him feel that 'twas not alone her splendid body commanded love, but a spirit which might mate with a strong man's and be companion to his own. His theories of womankind, which were indeed curiously in advance of his age, were such as demanded great things, and not alone demanded, but also gave them.

"A man and woman should not seem beings of a different race--the one all strength, the other all weakness," was his thought. "They should gaze into each other's eyes with honest, tender human passion, which is surely a great thing, as nature made it. Each should know the other's love, and strength, and honour may be trusted through death--or life--themselves. 'Tis not a woman's love is won by pretty gallantries, nor a man's by flattering weak surrender. Love grows from a greater thing, and should be as compelling--even in the higher, finer thing which thinks--as is the roar of the lion in the jungle to his mate, and her glad cry which answers him."

And therefore, at last he had said to himself that this beauteous, strong, wild thing surely might be she who would answer him one day, and he held his thoughts of her in check no more, nor avoided the speech he heard of her, and indeed, with adroitness which never betrayed itself through his reserve of bearing, at times encouraged it; and in a locked drawer in his apartments, wheresoever he travelled, there lay always the picture with the stormy, yearning eyes.

From young Tantillion he could, without any apparent approach at questioning, hear such details of Gloucestershire life in the neighbourhood of Wildairs as made him feel that he was not far separated from that which his mind dwelt on. Little Lady Betty, having entered the world of fashion, was more voluminous in her correspondence than ever, the more especially as young Langton appeared to her a very pretty fellow, and he being Tom's confidant, was likely to hear her

letters read, or at least be given extracts from them. Her caustic condemnation of the fantastical Mistress Clo had gradually lapsed into a doubtful wonder, which later became open amaze not untinged with a pretty spitefulness and resentment.

"'Tis indeed a strange thing, and one to make one suspicious of her, Thomas," she wrote, "with all her bold ways, to suddenly put on such decorum. We are all sure 'tis from some cunning motive, and wait to find out what she will be at next. At first none believed she would hold out or would know how to behave herself, but Lud! if you could see her I am sure, Tom, both you and Mr. Langton would be disgusted by her majestic airs. Being dressed in woman's clothing she is taller than ever, and so holds her chin and her eyes that it makes any modist woman mad. If she was a Duchess at Court she could not be more stately than she now pretends she is (for of course it is pretence, as anyone knows). She has had the vile cunningness to stop her bad langwidg, as if she had never swore an oath in her life (such deseatfulness!). And none can tell where she hath learned her manners, for if you will beleave the thing, 'tis said she never makes a blunder, but can sweep a great curtsey and sail about a saloon full of company as if she was bred to it, and can dance a minuet and bear herself at a feast in a way to surprise you. Lady Maddon says that women who are very vile and undeserving are sometimes wickedly clever, and can pick up modist women's manners wondrously, but they always break out before long and are more indecent than ever; and you may mark my Lady Maddon's words, she says this one will do the same, but first she is playing a part and

restraining herself that she may deseave some poor gentleman and trap him into marrying her. It makes Lady Maddon fall into a passion to talk of her, and she will flush quite red and talk so fast, but indeed after I see the creature or hear some new story of her impudent victories, I fall into a passion myself--for, Tom, no human being can put her in her place."

It must be confessed that the attitude of the recipient of these letters was by no means a respectful one, they being read and re-read with broad grins and frequent outbursts of roaring laughter, ending in derisive or admiring comments, even Bob Langton, who had no objection to pretty Lady Betty's oglings and summing of him as a dangerous beau, breaking forth into gleeful grinning himself.

"Hang me if some great nobleman won't marry her," cried Tom, "and a fine lady she'll make, too! Egad, it almost frightens one, for all the joke of it, to think of a woman who can do such things--to be a madder romp than any and suddenly to will that she will change in such a way, and hold herself firm and be beat by naught. 'Tis scarce human. Bet says that her kinsman, my Lord Twemlow, has took her in hand and is as proud of her and as fidgety as some match-making mother. And the county people who would not have spoke to her a year ago, have begun to visit Wildairs and invite her to their houses, for all the men are wild after her, and the best way to make an entertainment a fine thing is to let it be known that she will grace it. Even Sir Jeof and his cronies are taken in because they shine in her glory and are made decent by

it."

"They say, too," cried Bob Langton, "that she makes them all behave themselves, telling them that unless their manners are decent they cannot follow her to the fine houses she is bid to--and she puts them through a drill and cuts off their drink and their cursings and wicked stories. And Gloucestershire and Warwickshire and Worcestershire are all agog with it!"

"And they follow her like slaves," added Tantillion, in an ecstacy, "and stand about with their mouths open to stare at her swimming though her minuets with bowing worshippers, and oh! Roxholm--nay, I should say Osmonde; but how can a man remember you are Duke instead of Marquis?--'tis told that in the field in her woman's hat and hunting-coat she is handsomer than ever. Even my Lord Dunstanwolde has rode to the meet to behold her, and admires her as far as a sober elderly gentleman can."

That my Lord Dunstanwolde admired her, Osmonde knew. His rare letters told a grave and dignified gentleman's version of the story and spoke of it with kindly courtesy and pleasure in it. It had proved that the change which had come over her had been the result of no caprice or mischievous spirit but of a reasonable intention, to which she had been faithful with such consistency of behaviour as filled the gossips and onlookers with amazement.

"'Tis my belief," said the kindly nobleman, "that being in truth a noble creature, though bred so wildly, the time came when she realised herself a woman, and both wit and heart told her that 'twas more honourable to live a woman's life and not a madcap boy's. And her intellect being of such vigour and fineness, she can execute what her thought conceives."

Among the gentlemen who were her courtiers there was much talk of the fashionable rake Sir John Oxon, who, having appeared at her birthnight supper, had become madly enamoured of her, and had stayed in the country at Eldershawe Park and laid siege to her with all his forces and with much fervour of feeling besides. 'Twas a thing well known that this successful rake had never lost his heart to a woman in his life before, and that his victims had all been snared by a part played to villanous perfection; but 'twas plain enough that at last he had met a woman who had set that which he called his soul on fire. He could not tear himself away from the country, though the gayeties of the town were at their highest. When in her presence his burning blue eyes followed her every movement, and when she treated him disdainfully he turned pale.

"But she leaves him no room for boasting," related young Tantillion. "He may worship as any man may, but she shows no mercy to any, and him she treats with open scorn when he languishes. He grows thin and pale and is half-crazed with his passion for her."

There is no man who has given himself up to a growing passion and has not yet revealed it, who does not pass through many an hour of unrest. How could it be otherwise? In his absence from the object of his feeling every man who lives is his possible rival, every woman his possible enemy, every event a possible obstacle in the way to that he yearns for. And from this situation there is nothing which can save a man. He need not be a boy or a fool to be tormented despite himself; the wisest and gravest are victims to these fits of heat and cold if they have modesty and know somewhat of the game of chance called Life. What may not happen to a castle left undefended; what may not be filched from coffers left unlocked? This is the history of a man who, despite the lavishness of Fortune and the gifts she had poured forth before him, was of a stately humility. That he was a Duke and of great estate, that he had already been caressed by the hand of Fame and had been born more stalwart and beautiful than nine men of ten, did not, to his mind, make sure for him the love of any woman whom he had not served and won. He was of no meek spirit, but he had too much wit and too great knowledge of the chances of warfare not to know that in love's campaign, as in any other, a man must be on the field if he would wield his sword.

So my lord Duke had his days of fret and restlessness as less fortunate men have them, and being held on the Continent by duties he had undertaken in calmer moments, lay sometimes awake at night reproaching himself that he had left England. Such hours do not make a man grow cooler, and by the time the second year had ripened, the months were

long indeed. Well as he had thought he knew himself, there were times when the growth of this passion which possessed him awaked in him somewhat of wonder. 'Twas for one with whom he had yet never exchanged word or glance, a creature whose wild youth seemed sometimes a century away from him. There had been so many others who had crossed his path--great beauties and small ones--but only to this one had his being cried out aloud.

"It has begun," he had said to himself. "I have heard them tell of it--of how one woman's face came back to a man again and again, of how her eyes would look into his and would not leave him or let him rest. It has begun for me, too."

He had grave duties to perform, affairs of serious import to arrange, interviews to hold with great personages and small, and though none might read it in his bearing he found himself ever beholding this face, ever followed by the eyes which would not leave him and which, had they done so, would have left him to the dark. Yet this was hid within his own breast and was his own strange secret which he gave himself up to dwell upon but when he was alone. When he awakened in the morning he lay and thought of it and counted that a day had passed and another begun, and found himself pondering, as all those in his case do, on the events of the future and the incidents which would lead him to them. At night, sometimes in long rides or walks he took alone, he lived these incidents through and imagined he beheld her as she would look when they first met, as she would look when he told her his purpose in

coming to her. If he pleased her, his fancy pictured him the warm flash of her large eye, the smile of her mouth, half-proud, half-tender, a look which even when but imagined made his pulses beat.

"I do not know her face well enough," he said, "to picture all the beauteous changes of it, but there will sure be a thousand which a man might spend a life of love in studying."

Among the many who passed hours in his company at this time, there was but one who guessed, even distantly, at what lay at the root of his being, and this was the man who, being in a measure of like nature with his own, had been in the same way possessed when deep passion came to him.

At this period his Grace of Marlborough already felt the tossings of the rising storm in England, and the emotions which his Duchess's letters aroused within him, her anger at the intrigues about her, her tigress love for and belief in him, her determination to defend and uphold him with all the powers of her life and strength and imperial spirit, were, it is probable, moving and stimulating things which put him in the mood to be keen of sight and sympathy.

"There dwells some constant thought in your mind, my lord Duke," he said, on a night in which they sate together alone. "Is it a new one?"

"No," Osmonde answered; "'twould perhaps not be so constant if it were.

It is an old thought which has taken a new form. In times past"--his voice involuntarily falling a tone--"I did not realise its presence."

The short silence which fell was broken by the Duke and with some suddenness.

"Is it one of which you would rid yourself?" he asked.

"No, your Grace."

"Tis well," gravely, "You could not--if you would."

He asked no further question, but went on as if in deep thought, rather reflecting aloud.

"There are times," he said, "when to some it is easy and natural to say that such fevers are folly and unreasonableness--but even to those so slightly built by nature, and of memories so poor, such times do not come, nor can be dreamed of, when they are passing through the furnace fires. They come after--or before."

Osmonde did not speak. He raised his eyes and met those of his illustrious companion squarely, and for a short space each looked into the soul of the other, it so seemed, though not a word was spoke.

"You did not say the thing before," the Duke commented at last. "You

will not say it after."

"No, I shall not," answered Osmonde, and somewhat later he added, with flushed cheek, "I thank your Grace for your comprehension of an unspoken thing."

Distant as he was from Gloucestershire there seemed a smiling fortune in the chances by which his thought was fed. What time had wrought he heard as time went on--that her graces but developed with opportunity, that her wit matched her beauty, that those who talked gossip asked each other in these days, not what disgrace would be her downfall, but what gentleman of those who surrounded her, paying court, would be most likely to be smiled upon at last. From young Tantillion he heard such things, from talkative young officers back after leave of absence, and more than once from ladies who, travelling from England to reach foreign gayeties, brought with them the latest talk of the country as well as of the town.

From the old Lady Storms, whom he encountered in Vienna, he heard more than from any other. She had crossed the Channel with her Chaplain, her spaniel, her toady, and her parrot, in search of enlivenment for her declining years, and hearing that her Apollo Belvidere was within reach, sent a message saying she would coax him to come and make love to an old woman, who adored him as no young one could, and whose time hung heavy on her hands.

He went to her because she was a kindly, witty old woman, and had always avowed an affection for him, and when he arrived at her lodgings he found her ready to talk by the hour. All the gossip of the Court she knew, all the marriages being made or broken off, all the public stories of her Grace of Marlborough's bullyings of her Majesty and revilings of Mrs. Masham, and many which were spiced by being private and new. And as she chattered over her dish of chocolate and my lord Duke listened with the respect due her years, he knew full well that her stories would not be brought to a close without reaching Gloucestershire at last--or Warwickshire or Worcester, or even Berks or Wilts, where she would have heard some romance she would repeat to him; for in truth it ever seemed that it must befall so when he met and talked with man or woman who had come lately from England, Ireland, or Wales.

And so it did befall, but this time 'twas neither Gloucestershire, Worcester, Warwick, nor Berks she had visited or entertained guests from, but plain, lively town gossip she repeated apropos of Sir John Oxon, whose fortunes seemed in evil case. In five years' time he had squandered all his inheritance, and now was in such straits through his creditors that it seemed plain his days of fashionable wild living and popularity would soon be over, and his poor mother was using all her wits to find him a young lady with a fortune.

"And in truth she found him one, two years ago," her Ladyship added, "a West Indian heiress, but at that time he was dangling after the wild

Gloucestershire beauty and was mad for her. What was her name? I forget it, though I should not. But she was disdainful and treated him so scornfully that at last they quarrelled--or 'twas thought so--for he left the country and hath not been near her for months. Good Lord!" of a sudden; "is not my Lord Dunstanwolde your Grace's distant kinsman?"

"My father's cousin twice removed, your Ladyship," answered Osmonde, wondering somewhat at the irrelevance of the question.

"Then you will be related to the fantastic young lady too," she said, "if his lordship is successful in his elderly suit."

"His lordship?" queried Osmonde; "his lordship of Dunstanwolde?"

"Yes," said the old woman, in great good humour, "for he is more in love than all the rest. Faith, a man must be in love if he will hear 'No' twice said to him when he is sixty-five and then go back to kneel and plead again."

My lord Duke rose from his seat to set upon the table near by his chocolate-cup. Months later he remembered how mad the tale had seemed to him, and that there had been in his mind no shadow of belief in it; even that an hour after it had, in sooth, passed from his memory and been forgotten.

"'Tis a strange rumour, your Ladyship," he said. "For myself I do not

credit it, knowing of my lord's early loss and his years of mourning through it."

"'Tis for that reason all the neighbourhood is agog," answered my lady. "But 'tis for that reason I give it credit. These men who have worshipped a woman once can do it again. And this one--Lud! they say, she is a witch and no man resists her."

A few days later came a letter from my Lord Dunstanwolde himself, who had not writ from England for some time, and in the midst of his epistle, which treated with a lettered man's thoughtful interest of the news of both town and country, of Court and State, playhouse and club, there was reference to Gloucestershire and Mistress Clorinda of Wildairs Hall.

"In one of our past talks, Gerald," he wrote, "you said you thought often of the changes time might work in such a creature. You are given to speculative thought and spoke of the wrong the past had done her, and of your wonder if the strength of her character and the clearness of her mind might not reveal to her what the untoward circumstances of her life had hidden, and also lead her to make changes none had believed possible. Your fancies were bolder than mine. You are a stronger man than I, Gerald, though a so much younger one; you have a greater spirit and a far greater brain, and your reason led you to see possibilities I could not picture. In truth, in those days I regarded the young lady with some fear and distaste, being myself sober and

elderly. But 'tis you who were right. The change in her is indeed a wondrous one, but that I most marvel at is that I mark in her a curious gentleness, which grows. She hath taken under protection her sister Mistress Anne, a humble creature whose existence none have seemed previously aware of. The poor gentlewoman is timid and uncomely, but Mistress Clorinda shows an affection for her she hath shown to none other. But yesterday she said to me a novel thing in speaking of her--and her deep eyes, which can flash forth such lightnings, were soft as if dew were hid in them--'Why was all given to me,' saith she, 'and naught to her? Since Nature was not fair, then let me try to be so. She is good, she is innocent, she is helpless. I would learn of her. Innocence one cannot learn, and helpless I shall never be, yet would I learn of her.' She hath a great, strange spirit, Gerald, and strange fearlessness of thought. What other woman dare arraign Nature's self, and command mankind to retrieve her cruelties?"

Having finished his reading, my lord Duke turned to his window and looked out upon the night, which was lit to silver by the moon, which flooded the broad square before him and the park beyond it till 'twas lost in the darkness of the trees.

"No other woman--none," he said--and such a tumult shook his soul that of a sudden he stretched forth his arms unknowing of the movement and spoke as though to one close at hand. "Great God!" he said, low and passionate, "you call me, you call me! Let me but look into your eyes--but answer me with yours--and all of Life is ours!"