CHAPTER XXIV

Sir John Oxon Returns Also

When his Grace of Osmonde returned to town he found but one topic of conversation, and this was of such interest and gave such a fillip to gossip and chatter that fierce Sarah of Marlborough's encounters with Mrs. Masham, and her quarrels with Majesty itself, were for the time actually neglected. Her Grace had engaged in battles royal for so long a time and with such activity that the Court and the world were a little wearied and glad of something new. And here was a most promising event which might be discussed from a thousand points and bring forth pretty stories of past and present, as well as prophecies for the future.

The incomparable and amazing Clorinda, Countess of Dunstanwolde, having mourned in stately retirement for near upon two years (when Fashion demanded but one) and having paid such reverence to her old lord's memory as had seemed almost the building of a monument to his virtues, had cast her sables, left the country, and come up to town to reign again at Dunstanwolde House, which had been swept and garnished.

At Court, and in all the modish houses in the town, one may be sure that the whole story of her strange life was told and retold with a score of imaginative touches. Her baby oaths were resworn, her childish

wickedness depicted in colours which glowed, the biographies of the rough old country rakes who had trained her were related, in free translation, so to speak, over many a dish of chocolate and tea, and, these points dwelt on, what more dramatic than to turn upon the singular fortune of her marriage, the wealth, rank, and reputation of the man who had so worshipped her, and the unexpectedness of her grace and decorum the while she bore his name and shared his home with him.

"Had she come up to town," 'twas remarked, "and once having caught him, played the vixen and the shrew, turned his house into a bear-garden, behaved unseemly and put him to shame, none would have been surprised----"

"Many would have been all agog with joy," interrupted old Lady Storms who heard. "She was a woeful disappointment to many a gossiping woman, and a lesson to all the shifty fools who sell themselves to a man, and then trick him out of the price he paid."

At the clubs and coffee-houses the men talked also, though men's tongues do not run as fast as the tongues of womenkind, and their gossip was of a masculine order. She was a finer creature than ever, and at present was the richest widow in England. A man might well lose his wits over her mere self if she had naught but the gown she stood in, but he who got her would get all else beside. The new beaux and the old ones began to buy modish habits and periwigs, adorn themselves with new sword and shoulder knots, and trifle over the latest essences

offered in the toyshops.

"Split me," said one splendid fop, "but since my lady returned to town the price of ambergris and bergamot and civet powders has mounted perilously, and the mercers are all too busy to be civil. When I sent my rascal this morning to buy the Secret White Water to Curl Gentlemen's Hair, on my life he was told he must wait for it, since new must be made, as all had been engaged."

One man at that time appeared at the Cocoa Tree and Cribb's with a new richness of garb and a look in his face such as had not been seen there for many a day. In truth, for some time the coffee-houses had seen but little of him, and it had sometimes been said that he had fled the country to escape his creditors, or might be spending his days in a debtors' prison, since he had no acquaintances who would care to look for him if he were missing, and he might escape to France, or be seized and rot in gaol, and none be the wiser.

But on a night even a little before the throwing open of Dunstanwolde House, he sauntered into the Cocoa Tree and, having become so uncommon a sight, several turned to glance at him.

"Egad!" one cried low to another, "'tis Jack Oxon back again. Where doth the fellow spring from?"

His good looks it had been hard for him to lose, they being such as

were built of delicately cut features, graceful limbs, and an elegant air, but during the past year he had often enough looked haggard, vicious, and of desperate ill-humour, besides out of fashion, if not out at elbow. Now his look had singularly changed, his face was fresher, his eye brighter, though a little feverish in its light, and he wore a new sword and velvet scabbard, a rich lace steenkirk, and a modish coat of pale violet brocade.

"Where hast come from, Jack?" someone asked him. "Hast been into a nunnery?"

"Yes," he answered, "doing penance for thy sins, having none of my own."

"Hast got credit again, I swear," cried the other, "or thou wouldst not look such a dandy."

Sir John sate down and called for refreshment, which a drawer brought him.

"A man can always get credit," he said, with an ironic, cool little smile, "when his fortunes take a turn."

"Thou look'st as if thine had turned," said his companion. "Purple and silver, and thy ringlets brushed and perfumed like a girl's. In thy eyes 'tis a finer mop than any other man's French periwig, all know."

Sir John looked down on his shoulders at his soft rich fall of curls and smiled. "'Tis finer," he said. "'Tis as fine for a man as a certain beauty's, we once talked of, was for a woman."

The man who talked with him laughed with a half-sneer.

"Thou canst not forget her hair, Jack," he said, "but the lock stayed on her head despite thee. Art going to try again, now she is a widow?"

Sir John looked up from his drink and in his eye there leapt up a devil in spite of himself, for he had meant--if he could--to keep cool.

"Ay," he said, "by God! I am."

So when men talked of Lady Dunstanwolde 'twas not unnatural that, this story having been bruited about, they should talk also of Jack Oxon, and since they talked to each other, the rumour reached feminine ears which pricked themselves at once; and when my lord Duke of Osmonde came to town and went into the world, he also heard discussions of Sir John Oxon. This gentleman who had been missing in the World of Fashion had reappeared, and 'twas believed had returned to life to try his fortunes with my Lady Dunstanwolde. And 'twas well known indeed that he had been the first lover she had known, for the elderly country roisterers

had been naught but her playmates and her father's boon companions, and Sir John had appeared at the famous birthnight supper and had been the only town man who had ever seen her in her male attire, and was among those who toasted her when she returned to the banquet-room splendid in crimson and gold, and ordered all to fall upon their knees before her; and Sir John--(he was then in the heyday of his beauty and success) had gone mad with love for her, and 'twas believed that she had returned his passion, as any girl well might, though she was so proud-spirited a creature that none could be quite sure. At least 'twas known that he had laid seige to her, and for near two years had gone often to the country, and many had seen him gaze at her in company when his passion was writ plain in his blue eyes. Suddenly, on his reappearance, since he for some unknown reason wore the look of a man whose fortunes might have changed for the better, there were those among whom the tide took a turn somewhat in Sir John's favour. 'Twas even suggested by a woman of fashion, given somewhat to romance, that perhaps the poor man had fallen into evil ways and lost his good looks and elegant air through thwarted passion, and 'twas thought indeed a touching thing that at the first gleam of hope he should emerge from his retirement almost restored in spirit and bloom.

The occupants of coaches and chairs passing before the entrance to Osmonde House, which was a great mansion situated in a garden, noted but a few days after the world had heard her ladyship was in town, that his Grace had returned also. Lacqueys stood about the entrance, and the Osmonde liveries were to be seen going to and fro in the streets, the

Duke was observed to drive to Kensington and back, and to St. James's, and the House of Parliament, and it was known was given audience by the Queen upon certain secret matters of State. 'Twas indeed at this time that the changes were taking place in her Majesty's councils, and his anticipation of a ministerial revolution had so emboldened King Louis that he had ventured to make private overtures to the royal lady's confidential advisers. "What we lose in Flanders we shall gain in England," Marlborough's French enemy, Torcy, had said. And between the anger and murmurs of a people who had turned to rend a whilom idol, the intrigues and cabals about the throne, the quarrels of her counsellors and ladies of the bedchamber, and the passionate reproaches of the strongest and most indomitable of female tyrants, 'twas small wonder a dull, ease-loving woman, feeling the burden of her royalty all too wearisome and heavy, should turn with almost pathetic insistence to a man young enough to be her son, attractive enough to be a favourite, high enough to be impeccable, and of such clear wit, strength of will and resource, and power over herself and others as seemed to set him apart from all the rest of those who gathered to clamour about her. In truth, my lord Duke's value to her Majesty was founded greatly upon that which had drawn his Grace of Marlborough to him. He wanted nothing; all the others had some desire to gain, secret or avowed. The woman who had so longed for unregal feminine intimacy and companionship

that with her favoured attendant she had played a comedy of private life--doffing her queenship and becoming simple "Mrs. Morley," that with "Mrs. Freeman," at least, she might forget she was a Queen--was

not formed by Nature to combat with State intrigues and Court duplicities.

"I am given no quiet," the poor august lady said. "These people who resign places and demand them, who call meetings and create a ferment, these ladies who vituperate and clamour like deserted lovers, weary me. Your Grace's strength brings me repose!"

And as the father had felt sympathy and pity for poor Catherine of Braganza in Charles the Second's day, so the son felt pity and gave what support he could to poor bullied and bewildered Queen Anne. To him her queenship was truly the lesser thing, her helpless, somewhat heavy-witted and easily wavering womanhood the greater; and there were those who feared him, for such reasons as few men in his position had been feared before.

His Grace had been but two days in town, and on the morning of the second had driven in his chariot to Kensington, and had an audience upon the private matter already spoken of, and which would in all likelihood take him, despite his wishes, across the Channel and to the French Court. He might be commanded away at the very moment that he wished most to be on English soil, in London itself. For howsoever ardent and long hidden a man's passion, he must, if he be delicate of feeling, await that moment which is ripe for him to speak. And this he pondered on as his chariot rolled through the streets to bear him to make his first visit to her ladyship of Dunstanwolde.

"I have known and dreamed of her almost all her life," he thought. "'Tis but three years since she first saw my face; through the first year she was another man's wife, and these two last his mourning widow. When I behold her to day I shall learn much."

The sun was shining gloriously, and the skies' blue was deep and clear. He looked up at it as he drove, and at the fresh early summer greenness of the huge trees and thick grass in the parks and gardens; and when his equipage rolled into the court at Dunstanwolde House, he smiled to himself for pleasure to see its summer air, with the lacqueys making excuse to stand outside in the brightness of the day, little Nero, the black negro page, sunning himself and his pugs and spaniels on the plot of grass at the front, and the windows thrown open to let in the soft fresh air, while the balconies before the drawing-room casements were filled with masses of flowers--yellow and white perfumed things, sent up fresh from the country and set in such abundance that the balconies bloomed like gardens. The last time he had beheld her, she had stood by her husband's coffin, swathed in long, heavy draperies of black, looking indeed a wonderful tragic figure; and this was in his mind as he walked up the broad staircase, followed by the lacquey, who a moment later flung open the door of the saloon and announced him with solemn majesty.

But oh! the threshold once crossed, the great white-and-gold decorated apartment seemed flooded with sunlight and filled with the fragrance of

daffodils and jonquils and narcissus blown in through the open window, and Mistress Anne sate sweet and modest in a fine chair too big for her dear small body; but my lord Duke scarce could see her, for 'twas as if the sun shone in his eyes when there rose from a divan to meet him a tall goddess clad in white and with a gold ribband confining her black hair and her waist, and a branch of yellow-gold flowers in her hand, which looked as if surely she might just have gathered them on the terrace at Camylott.

And she had surely by some magic blotted out the past and had awakened to a present which was like new birth and had no past, for she blushed the loveliest, radiant blush--at sight of him--as if she had been no great lady, but a sweet, glowing girl.

What he said to her, or she to him, he knew no more than any lesser man in his case knows, for he was in a whirl of wonder and strange delight, and could scarce hold in his mind that there was need that he should be sober, this being his first visit to her since she had cast the weeds worn for his own kinsman; and there sate Mistress Anne, changing from red to white, as if through some great secret emotion--though he did not know 'twas at the sight of them standing together, and the sudden knowledge and joy it brought to her, which made her very heart to quake in its tenderness. This--this was the meaning of what she had so wondered at in her sister's mood when they spoke of the poor girl left widowed; this was how she had known, and if so, she must have learned it in her own despite at first, in that year when she had been a bound

woman, when they two had been forced to encounter each other, holding their hearts in gyves of iron and making no sound or sign. And the fond creature remembered the night before the marriage when she had passed through a strange scene in her sister's chamber, and one thing she had said came back to her, and now she understood its meaning.

"I love my Lord Dunstanwolde as well as any other man, and better than some, for I do not hate him. Since I have been promised to him"--('twas this which now came back to her)--"I own I have for a moment met another gentleman who might--'twas but for a moment, and 'tis done with."

And this--this had been he, his Grace the Duke of Osmonde--who was so fit a mate for her, and whose brown eyes so burned with love. And she was a free woman, and there they stood at the open window among the flowers--both bound, both free!

Free! She started a little as she said the word in thought again, for she knew a strange wild story none other than herself knew, and her sister, and Sir John Oxon, and they did not suspect she shared their secret. And for long it had seemed to her only some cruel thing she had dreamed; and the wild lovely creature she had watched and stood guard over with such trembling, during a brief season of bewildered anguish, seemed to be a sort of vision also. At the end of but a few short months Mistress Anne had felt this lawless, beauteous being had left the splendid body she had inhabited, and another woman's life had begun

in it--another woman's. That woman it was who had wed Lord Dunstanwolde
and made him a blissful man, that woman had been since then her sister, her protector, and her friend; 'twas she who had watched by my lord's body, and spoke low words to him, and stroked his poor dead hand; 'twas she who laid his wife's hair and her child's, and the little picture, on his still breast; 'twas she who sate by the widowed girl at Wildairs--and 'twas she, she made glorious by love, who stood and smiled among the window's daffodils.

His Grace and her ladyship were speaking softly together of the flowers, the sunshine, of the town and Court, and of beauteous Camylott. Once my lord Duke's laugh rang out, rich and gay like a boy's, and there was such youth and fire and happiness in his handsome face as made Mistress Anne remember that, as it was with my lady, so it was with him--that because he was so tall and great and stately, the world forgot that he was young.

"But," said the loving woman to herself with a sudden fear, "if he should come back. Nothing so cruel could happen--'tis past and dead and forgiven. He could not--could not come."

Then his Grace went away. My lady spoke sweet and gracious words to him with the laughing, shining eyes of Clo Wildairs at her most wondrous hours, and the Duke holding her hand, bent and kissed it with the tender passion of a hungered man, as he had not dared to dream of

kissing it before.

And he went down the staircase a new man, carrying his head as though a crown had been set on it and he would bear it nobly. In his tawny eye there was a smile which was yet solemn though it was deeply bright.

"'Tis the beginning of the world," he said inwardly--"'And the evening and the morning were the first day.' I have looked into her eyes."

And as his chariot rolled through the entrance into the street, another passed it and entered the court, and through the glass he saw a fair man, richly dressed, his bright curls falling soft and thick on his shoulders; and he was arranging the ribband of his sword-knot, and smiling a little with downcast eyes--and it was Sir John Oxon.