

CHAPTER XXV

To-morrow

A dozen gentlemen at least, rumour said, would have rejoiced to end for her, by marriage, this lovely lady's widowhood; but there were but two she would be like to choose between, and they were different men indeed. One of them, both her heart and her ambition might have caused her to make choice of, for he combined such qualities and fortunes as might well satisfy either.

"Zounds," said an old beau, "the woman who wants more than his Grace of Osmonde can give--more money, greater estates, and more good looks--is like to go unsatisfied to her grave. She will take him, I swear, and smile like Heaven in doing it."

"But there was a time," said Sir Chris Crowell, who had come to town (to behold his beauty's conquests, as he said) and who spent much time at the coffee-houses and taverns telling garrulous stories of the days of Mistress Clo of Wildairs, "there was a time when I would have took oath that Jack Oxon was the man who would have her. Lord! he was the first young handsome thing she had ever met--and she was but fifteen for all her impudence, and had lived in the country and seen naught but a handful of thick-bodied, red-faced old rakes. And Jack was but four and twenty and fresh from town, and such a beauty that there was

not a dairymaid in the country but was heartbroke by him--though he may have done no more than cast his devilish blue eye on her. For he had a way, I tell ye, that lad, he had a way with him that would have took any woman in. A dozen parts he could play and be a wonder in every one of them--and languish, and swear oaths, and repent his sins, and plead for mercy, with the look of an angel come to earth, and bring a woman to tears--and sometimes ruin, God knows!--by his very playing of the mountebank. Good Lord! to see those two at the birthnight supper was a sight indeed. My Lady Oxon she would have been, if either of them had been a fortune. But 'twas Fate--and which jilted the other, Heaven knows. And if 'twas he who played false, and he would come back now, he will find he hath fire to deal with--for my Lady Dunstanwolde is a fierce creature yet, though her eye shines so soft in these days." And he puffed at his churchwarden's pipe and grinned.

Among the men who had been her playmates it would seem that perhaps this old fellow had loved her best of all, or was more given to being demonstrative, or more full of a good-natured vanity which exulted in her as being a sort of personal property to vaunt and delight in; at all events Sir Chris had come to the town, where he had scarce ever visited in all his life before, and had in a way constituted himself a sort of henchman or courtier of her ladyship of Dunstanwolde.

At her house he presented himself when first he came up--short, burly, red-faced, and in his best Gloucestershire clothes, which indeed wore a rustic air when borne to London on the broad back of a country

gentleman in a somewhat rusty periwig.

When he beheld the outside stateliness of the big town mansion he grinned with delight; when he entered its doors and saw its interior splendours he stared about him with wondering eyes; and when he was passed from point to point by one tall and gorgeously liveried lacquey after another, he grew sober. When her ladyship came to him shortly after, she found him standing in the middle of the magnificent saloon (which had been rearranged and adorned for her by her late lord in white and golden panels, with decoration of garlands and Cupids and brocades after the manner of the French King Louis Fourteenth), and he was gazing about him still, and now scratching his periwig absently.

"Eh, my lady," he said, making an awkward bow, as if he did not know how to bear himself in the midst of such surroundings; "thy father was right."

Never had he seen a lady clad in such rich stuffs and looking so grand and like a young queen, but her red lips parted, showing her white teeth, and her big black eyes laughed as merrily as ever he had seen them when Clo Wildairs tramped across the moors with him, her gun over her fustian shoulder.

"Was he so?" she cried, taking hold of his thick hand and drawing him towards a huge gold carved sofa. "Come and tell me then when he was right, and if 'twas thou wast wrong."

Sir Chris stared at her a minute, straight at her arch, brilliant face, and then his rueful countenance relaxed itself into a grin.

"Ecod!" he said, still staring hard, "thou art not changed a whit."

"Ecod!" she said, mocking him, "but I am that. Shame on thee to deny it. I am a Countess and have been presented to the Queen, and cast my ill manners, and can make a Court obeisance." And she made him a great, splendid courtesy, sweeping down amidst her rich brocades as if she would touch the floor.

"Lord! Lord!" he said, and scratched his periwig again. "Thou look'st like a Queen thyself. But 'tis thy big eyes are not changed, Clo, that laughed so through the black fringes of them, like stars shining through a bush, and--and thy saucy way that makes a man want to seize hold on thee and hug thee--though--though--" He checked himself, half-frightened, but she laughed out at him with that bell-like clearness he remembered so well, and which he swore afterwards would put heart into any man.

"'Tis no harm that a man should want to seize hold upon a woman," she said; "'tis a thing men are given to, poor souls, and 'tis said Heaven made them so; but let him not be unwary and strive to do it. Town gentlemen know 'tis not the fashion."

Sir Chris chuckled and looked about him again.

"Clo," he said, "since thou hast laughed at me and I am not frightened by thy grandness, as I was at first, I will tell thee. I am going to stay in Lunnon for awhile, and look on at thee, and be a town man myself. Canst make a town man of me, Clo?"--grinning.

"Yes," answered her ladyship, holding her head on one side to look him over, "with a velvet coat and some gold lace, and a fine new periwig scented with orris or jessamine, and a silver-gilt sword and a hat cocked smartly, and a snuff-box, with a lady's picture in it. I will give thee mine, and thou shalt boast of it in company."

He slapped his thigh and laughed till his red face grew purple.

"Nay," he said, "thy father was wrong. He said I was a fool to come, for such as me and him was out of place in town, and fine ladies' drawing-rooms would make us feel like stable-boys. He said I would be heart-sick and shame-faced in twelve hours, and turn tail and come back to Gloucestershire like a whipt dog--but I shall not, I swear, but shall be merrier and in better heart than I have been since I was young. It gets dull in the country, Clo," shaking his head, "when a man gets old and heavy, and 'tis worst when he has no children left to keep him stirring. I have took a good lodging in the town, and I will dress myself like a Court gentleman and go to the coffee-houses and the play, and hear the wits. And I shall watch thy coach-and-six drive by and

tell the company I was thy playmate when thou wert Clo Wildairs; and thou art not too fine a lady, even now thou art a Court beauty and a Countess, to be kind to an old fellow from the country."

He strutted away from the mansion, the proudest and happiest man in London, giving his hat a jaunty cock and walking with an air, his old heart beating high with joy to feel that this beautiful creature had not forgot old days and did not disdain him. He went to tailors and mercers and wig-makers and furnished himself forth with fine belongings, and looked a town gentleman indeed when he came to exhibit himself to my lady; and before long the Mall and the park became familiar with his sturdy old figure and beaming country face, and the beauties and beaux and wits began to know him, and that he had been one of Mistress Clorinda Wildairs's companions in her Gloucestershire days, and had now come to town, drawn simply by his worship of her, that he might delight himself by looking on at her triumphs.

There were many who honestly liked his countrified, talkative good nature, and inviting him to their houses made a favourite of him; and there were others who encouraged him, to hear him tell his stories; and several modish beauties amused themselves by coquetting with him, one of these being my Lady Betty Tantillion, who would tease and ogle him until he was ready to lose his wits in his elderly delight. One of her favourite tricks was to pout at him and twit him on his adoration of my Lady Dunstanwolde, of whom she was in truth not too fond; though she had learned to keep a civil tongue in her head, since her ladyship was

a match for half a dozen such as she, and, when she chose to use her cutting wit, proved an antagonist as greatly to be feared as in the days when Lady Maddon, the fair and frail "Willow Wand," had fallen into hysteric fits in the country mercer's shop.

"You men always lose your wits when you see her," she would say. "'Tis said Sir John Oxon"--with a malicious little glance at that gentleman, who stood near her ladyship across the room--"'tis said Sir John Oxon lost more, and broke a fine match, and squandered his fortune, and sank into the vilest reputation--all for love of her."

She turned to his Grace of Osmonde, who was near, waving her fan languishing. "Has your Grace heard that story?" she asked. His Grace approached smiling--he never could converse with this young lady without smiling a little--she so bore out all the promise of her school-girl letters and reminded him of the night when he had found her brother, Ensign Tom, and Bob Langley grinning and shouting over her homilies on the Gloucestershire beauty.

"Which one is it?" he said. "Your ladyship has been kind enough to tell me so many."

"'Tis the one about Sir John Oxon and her ladyship of Dunstanwolde," she answered, with a pretty simper. "All Gloucestershire knew how they were in love with each other when she was Mistress Wildairs--until she cast him off for my Lord Dunstanwolde. 'Tis said she drove him to

ruin--but now he has come back to her, and all think she will remember her first love and yield to him at last. And surely it would be a pretty romance."

"Jack Oxon was not drove to ruin by her ladyship," cried Sir Chris; "not he. But deep in love with her he was, 'tis sure, and had she been any other woman she must have been melted by him. Ecod!" looking across the room at the two, with a reflective air, "I wonder if she was!"

"But look at his eyes now," said my Lady Betty, giving a side glance at his Grace. "They glow like fire, and wheresoever she moves he keeps them glued on her."

"She doth not keep hers glued on him," said Sir Chris, "but looks away and holds her head up as if she would not see him."

"That is her way to draw him to her," cried Lady Betty. "It drives a man wild with love to be so treated--and she is a shrewd beauty; but when he can get near enough he stands and speaks into her ear--low, that none may listen. I have seen him do it more than once, and she pretends not to hearken, but hears it all, and murmurs back, no doubt, while she seems to gaze straight before her, and waves her fan. I heard him speak once when he did not think me close to him, and he said, 'Have you forgot--have you forgot, Clorinda?' and she answered then, but her words I did not hear." She waved her painted fan with a coquettish flourish. "'Tis not a new way of making love," she said with

arch knowingness. "It hath been done before."

"He hath drawn near and is speaking to her now," said Sir Chris, staring wonderingly, "but I swear it does not look like love-making. He looks like a man who threatens."

"He threatens he will fall on his sword if she will not yield," laughed Lady Betty. "They all swear the same thing."

My lord Duke moved forward. He had heard this talk often before during the past weeks, and he had seen this man haunting her presence, and always when he was near or spoke to her a strange look on her face, a look as if she made some struggle with herself or him--and strangest of all, though she was so gracious to himself, something in her eyes had seemed to hold him back from speaking, as if she said, "Not yet--not yet! Soon--but not yet!" and though he had not understood, it had bewildered him, and brought back a memory of the day she had sate in the carven gilded chair and delivered her lord's message to him, and her eyes had pleadingly forbade him to come to Dunstan's Wolde while her words expressed her husband's hospitable desire. His passion for her was so great and deep, 'twas a fathomless pool whose depths were stirred by every breath of her, and so he had even waited till her eyes should say--"Now!"

He had moved towards her this moment, because she had looked up at him, as if she needed he should come nearer. She rose from her seat, leaving

Sir John Oxon where he stood. His Grace moved quicker and they met in the crowd, and as she looked up at him, he saw that she had lost a little of her radiant bloom, and she spoke in a low voice like a girl.

"Will your Grace take me to my coach?" she said. "I am not well."

And he led her, leaning on his arm, through the crowd to Mistress Anne, who was always glad to leave any assembly--the more brilliant they, the readier she to desert their throngs--and he escorted them to their coach, and before he left them asked a question gravely.

"Will your ladyship permit me," he said, "to wait on you to-morrow? I would know that your indisposition has passed."

My lady answered him in a low voice from the coach; her colour had come back, and she gave him her hand which he kissed. Then the equipage rolled away and he entered his own, and being driven back to Osmonde House said to himself gravely, over and over again, one word--"To-morrow!"

But within two hours a messenger in the royal liveries came from Kensington and as quickly as horses could carry him my lord Duke was with her Majesty, whom he found agitated and pale, important news from France having but just reached her. Immediate action was necessary, and there was none who could so well bear her private messages to the

French Court as could the man who had no interest of his own to serve, whom Nature and experience peculiarly fitted for the direction of affairs requiring discretion, swiftness of perception, self-control, and dignity of bearing. 'Twas his royal Mistress herself who said these things to his Grace, and added to her gracious commands many condescending words and proofs of confidence, which he received with courtly obeisance but with a galled and burning heart.

And on the coming of the morrow he was on his way to Versailles, and my Lady Dunstanwolde, having received news of the sudden exigency and his departure, sate in her chamber alone gazing as into vacancy, with a hunted look in her wide eyes.