CHAPTER II

"He is the King"

The bells pealed at intervals throughout the day in at least five villages over which his Grace of Osmonde was lord--at Roxholm they pealed, at Marlowell Dane, at Paulyn Dorlocke, at Mertounhurst, at Camylott--and in each place, when night fell, bonfires were lighted and oxen roasted whole, while there were dancing and fiddling and drinking of ale on each village green.

In truth, as Dame Watt had said, he had begun well--Gerald Walter John Percy Mertoun, Marquess of Roxholm; and well it seemed he would go on. He throve in such a way as was a wonder to his physicians and nurses, the first gentlemen finding themselves with no occasion for practising their skill, since he suffered from no infant ailments whatsoever, but fed and slept and grew lustier and fairer every hour. He grew so finely--perhaps because his young mother had defied ancient custom and forbidden his limbs and body to be bound--that at three months he was as big and strong as an infant of half a year. 'Twas plain he was built for a tall man with broad shoulders and noble head. But a few months had passed before his baby features modelled themselves into promise of marked beauty, and his brown eyes gazed back at human beings, not with infant vagueness, but with a look which had in it somewhat of question and reply. His retinue of serving-women were filled with such

ardent pride in him that his chief nurse had much to do to keep the peace among them, each wishing to be first with him, and being jealous of another who made him laugh and crow and stretch forth his arms that she might take him. The Commandress-in-Chief of the nurses was no ordinary female. She was the widow of a poor chaplain--her name Mistress Rebecca Halsell--and she gratefully rejoiced to have had the happiness to fall into a place of such honour and responsibility. She was of sober age, and being motherly as well as discreet, kept such faithful watch over him as few children begin life under.

The figure of this good woman throughout his childhood stood out from among all others surrounding him, with singular distinctness. She seemed not like a servant, nor was she like any other in the household. As he ripened in years, he realised that in his earliest memories of her there was a recollection of a certain grave respect she had seemed to pay him, and he saw it had been not mere deference but respect, as though he had been a man in miniature, and one to whom, despite his tender youth, dignity and reason should be qualities of nature, and therefore might be demanded from him in all things. As early as thought began to form itself clearly in him, he singled out Mistress Halsell as a person to reflect upon. When he was too young to know wherefore, he comprehended vaguely that she was of a world to which the rest of his attendants did not belong. 'Twas not that she was of greatly superior education and manners, since all those who waited upon him had been carefully chosen; 'twas that she seemed to love him more gravely than did the others, and to mean a deeper thing when she called him "my lord

Marquess." She was a pock-marked woman (she having taken the disease from her late husband the Chaplain, who had died of that scourge), and in her earliest bloom could have been but plainly favoured. She had a large-boned frame, and but for a good and serious carriage would have seemed awkward. She had, however, the good fortune to be the possessor of a mellow voice, and to have clear grey eyes, set well and deep in her head, and full of earnest meaning.

"Her I shall always remember," the young Marquess often said when he had grown to be a man and was Duke, and had wife and children of his own. "I loved to sit upon her knee, and lean against her breast, and gaze up into her eyes. 'Twas my child-fancy that there was deep within them something like a star, and when I gazed at it, I felt a kind of loving awe such as grew within me when I lay and looked up at a star in the sky."

His mother's eyes were of so dark a violet that 'twas his fancy of them that they looked like the velvet of a purple pansy. Her complexion was of roses and lilies, and had in truth by nature that sweet bloom which Sir Peter Lely was kind enough to bestow upon every beauty of King Charles's court his brush made to live on canvas. She was indeed a lovely creature and a happy one, her life with her husband and child so contenting her that, young though she was, she cared as little for Court life as my lord Duke, who, having lived longer in its midst than she, had no taste for its intrigues and the vices which so flourished in its hot-bed. Though the noblest Duke in England, and of a family

whose whole history was enriched with services to the royal house, his habits and likings were not such as made noblemen favourites at the court of Charles the Second. He was not given to loose adventure, and had not won the heart of my Lady Castlemaine, since he had made no love to her, which was not a thing to be lightly forgiven to any handsome and stalwart gentleman. Besides this, he had been so moved by the piteous case of the poor Queen, during her one hopeless battle for her rights when this termagant beauty was first thrust upon her as lady of her bedchamber, that on those cruel days during the struggle when the poor Catherine had found herself sitting alone, deserted, while her husband and her courtiers gathered in laughing, worshipping groups about her triumphant rival, this one gentleman had sought by his courteous respect to support her in her humiliated desolation, though the King himself had first looked black and then had privately mocked at him.

"He hath fallen in love with her," the Castlemaine had said afterwards to a derisive group; "he hath fallen deep in love--with her long teeth and her Portuguese farthingale."

"She needs love, poor soul, Heaven knows," the Duke returned, when this speech was repeated to him. "A poor girl taken from her own country, married to a King, and then insulted by his Court and his mistresses! Some man should remember her youth and desolateness, and not forget that another man has broke her heart and lets his women laugh at her misfortunes."

'Twould have been a dangerous speech perhaps had a man of the Court of Henry the Eighth made it, even to a friend, but Charles was too lightly vicious and too fond of gay scenes to be savage. His brutality was such as was carelessly wreaked on hearts instead of heads--hearts he polluted, made toys of, flung in the mire or broke; heads he left on the shoulders they belonged to. But he did not love his Grace of Osmonde, and though his rank and character were such that he could not well treat him with indignity, he did not regret that after his Grace's marriage with the Lady Rosalys Delile he appeared but seldom at Court.

"He is a tiresome fellow, for one can find no fault with him," his Majesty said, fretfully. "Odd's fish! fortune is on his side where my house is concerned. His father fought at Edgehill and Marston Moor, and they tell me died but two years after Naseby of a wound he had there. Let him go and bury himself on his great estates, play the benefactor to his tenantry, listen to his Chaplain's homilies, and pay stately visits to the manors of his neighbours."

His Grace lived much in the country, not being fond of town, but he did not bury himself and his fair spouse. Few men lived more active lives and found such joy in existence. He entertained at his country seats most brilliantly, since, though he went but seldom to London, he was able to offer London such pleasures and allurements that it was glad to come to him. There were those who were delighted to leave the Court itself to visit Roxholm or Camylott or some other of his domains. Men

who loved hunting and out-of-door life found entertainment on the estates of a man who was the most splendid sportsman of his day, whose moors and forests provided the finest game and his stables the finest horses in England. Women who were beauties found that in his stately rooms they might gather courts about them. Men of letters knew that in his libraries they might delve deep into the richest mines. Those who loved art found treasures in his galleries, and wide comprehension and finished tastes in their master.

And over the assemblies, banquets, and brilliant hunt balls there presided the woman with the loveliest eyes, 'twas said, in England, Scotland, Ireland, or Wales--the violet eyes King Charles had been stirred by and which had caused him a bitter scene with my Lady Castlemaine, whose eyes were neither violet nor depths of tender purity. The sweetest eyes in the world, all vowed them to be; and there was no man or woman, gentle or simple, who was not rejoiced by their smiling.

"In my book of pictures," said the little Marquess to his mother once, "there is an angel. She looks as you do when you come in your white robe to kiss me before you go down to dine with the ladies and gentlemen who are our guests. Your little shining crown is made of glittering stones, and hers is only gold. Angels wear only golden crowns--but you are like her, mother, only more beautiful."

The child from his first years was used to the passing and repassing

across his horizon of brilliant figures and interesting ones. From the big mullioned window of his nursery he could see the visitors come and go, he watched the beaux and beauties saunter in the park and pleasaunce in their brocades, laces, and plumed hats, he saw the scarlet coats ride forth to hunt, and at times fine chariots roll up the avenue with great people in them come to make visits of state. His little life was full of fair pictures and fair stories of them. When the house was filled with brilliant company he liked nothing so much as to sit on Mistress Halsell's knee or in his chair by her side and ask her questions about the guests he caught glimpses of as they passed to and fro. He was a child of strong imagination and with a great liking for the romantic and poetic. He would have told to him again and again any rumour of adventure connected with those he had beheld. He was greatly pleased by the foreign ladies and gentlemen who were among the guests--he liked to hear of the Court of King Louis the Fourteenth, and to have pointed out to him those visitors who were personages connected with it. He was attracted by the sound of foreign tongues, and would inquire to which country a gentleman or lady belonged, and would thrust his head out of the window when they sauntered on the terraces below that he might hear them speak their language. As was natural, he heard much interesting gossip from his attendants when they were not aware that he was observing, they feeling secure in his extreme youth. He could not himself exactly have explained how his conception of the difference between the French and English Courts arose, but at seven years old, he in some way knew that King Louis was a finer gentleman than King Charles, that his Court was more elegant, and that the

beauties who ruled it were not merry orange wenches, or romping card house-building maids of honour, or splendid viragoes who raved and stamped and poured forth oaths as fishwives do. How did he know it--and many other things also? He knew it as children always know things their elders do not suspect them of remarking, but which, falling upon their little ears sink deep into their tiny minds, and lying there like seeds in rich earth, put forth shoots and press upwards until they pierce through the darkness and flower and bear fruit in the light of day. He knew that a certain great Duchess of Portsmouth had been sent over from France by King Louis to gain something from King Charles, who had fallen in love with her. The meaning of "falling in love" he was yet vague in his understanding of, but he knew that the people hated her because they thought she played tricks and would make trouble for England if she led the King as she tried to do. The common people called her "Madame Carwell," that being their pronunciation of the French name she had borne before she had been made a Duchess. He had once heard his nurses Alison and Grace gossiping together of a great service of gold the King had given her, and which, when it had been on exhibition, had made the people so angry that they had said they would like to see it melted and poured down her throat. "If he must give it," they had grumbled, "he had better have bestowed it upon Madame Ellen."

Hearing this, my lord Marquess had left his playing and gone to the women, where they stood enjoying their gossip and not thinking of him. He stood and looked up at Alison in his grave little way.

"Who is Madame Ellen, Alison?" he inquired.

"Good Lord!" the woman exclaimed, aside to her companion.

"Why do the people like her better than the other?" he persisted.

At this moment Mistress Halsell entered the nursery, and her keen eye saw at once that his young Lordship had put some question to his attendants which they scarce knew how to answer.

"What does my lord Marquess ask, Grace?" she said; and my lord Marquess turned and looked at herself.

"I heard them speak of Madame Ellen," he answered. "They said something about some pretty things made of gold and that the people were angry that they were for her Grace of Portsmouth instead of Madame Ellen. Why do they like her better?"

Mistress Halsell took his hand and walked with him to their favourite seat in the big window.

"It is because she is the better woman of the two, my lord," she said.

"Is the other one bad, then?" he inquired. "And why does his Majesty give her things made of gold?"

"To pay her," answered Mistress Rebecca, looking thoughtfully out of the window.

"For what?" the young Marquess asked.

"For--for that an honest woman should not take pay for."

"Then why does he love her? Is he a bad King?" his voice lowering as he said it and his brown-eyed, ruddy little face grown solemn.

"A quiet woman in a place like mine cannot judge of Kings," she answered; "but to be King is a grave thing."

"Grave!" cried he; "I thought it was very splendid. All England belongs to him; he wears a gold crown and people kneel to kiss his hand. My father and mother kneel to him when they go to the Court."

"That is why it is grave," said Mistress Rebecca. "All the people look to him for their example. Because he is their head they follow him. He can lead them to good or evil. He can help England to be honest or base. He is the KING."

The little fellow looked out upon the fair scene spread before him. Many thoughts he could not yet have found words for welled up within him and moved him vaguely.

"He is the King," he repeated, softly; "he is the King!"

Mistress Rebecca looked at him with tender, searching eyes. She had, through her own thoughts, learned how much these small creatures--sometimes dealt with so carelessly--felt when they were too young for phrases, and how much, also, they remembered their whole lives through.

"He is the King," she said, "and a King must think of his people. A Duke, too, must think of his--as his Grace, your father, thinks, never dealing lightly with his great name or his great house, or those of whom he is governor."

The boy climbed upon her knee and sat there, leaning against her as he loved to do. His eyes rested on the far edge of the farthest purple moor, behind which the sun seemed to be slipping away into some other world he knew not of. The little clouds floating in the high blue sky were rosy where they were not golden; a flock of rooks was flying slowly homeward over the tree-tops, cawing lazily as they came. A great and beautiful stillness seemed to rest on all the earth, and his little mind was full of strange ponderings, leading him through labyrinths of dreams he would remember and comprehend the deep meaning of only when
he was a man. Somehow all his thoughts were trooping round about a rich and brilliant figure which was a sort of image standing to him for the personality of his Most Sacred Majesty King Charles the Second--the

King who was not quite a King, though all England looked to him, and he could lead it to good or evil.