

CHAPTER III

Sir Jeoffry Wildairs

It was not common in those days for young gentlemen of quality to love their books too dearly; in truth, men of all ranks and ages were given rather to leaving learning and the effort to acquire it to those who depended upon professions to gain their bread for them. Men of rank and fortune had too many amusements which required no aid from books, which, indeed, were not greatly the fashion. For country gentlemen there was hunting, coursing, cock-fights, the exhilarating watching of cudgelling bouts between yokels, besides visiting, and much eating and drinking and smoking of tobacco while jovial, and sometimes not too fastidious stories were told. When a man went up to town he had other pleasures to fill his time, and whether he was a country gentleman making his yearly visit or a fashionable rake and beau, his entertainment was not usually derived from books, a man who spent much time with them being indeed generally regarded as a milksop. But from the time when he lay stretched upon his nursery floor and gazed at pictures and lettering he had not learned to read, the little Marquess had a fondness for books. He learned to read early, and once having learned, was never so full of pleasure as when he had a volume to pore over. At first he revelled in stories of magicians, giants, afrits, and gnomes, but as soon as his tutors took him in hand he wakened every day to some new interest. Languages ancient and modern he learned with

great rapidity, having a special fondness for them, and at thirteen could speak French, high Dutch, and Italian excellently well for his years, besides having a scholarly knowledge of Latin and Greek. His tutor, Mr. Fox, an elderly scholar of honourable birth and many attainments, was as proud of his talents and advancement as his female attendants had been of his strength and beauty in his infancy. This gentleman, whose income had been reduced by misfortune, who had lost his wife and children tragically by one illness, and who had come to undertake his pupil an almost brokenhearted man, found in the promise of this young mind a solace he had never hoped to know again.

"I have taught young gentlemen before," he remarked privately to Mistress Halsell--"one at least with royal blood in his veins, though he was not called prince--but my lord Marquess has a fire I have seen in no other. To set him to work upon a new branch of study is like setting a flame to brushwood. 'Tis as though he burned his way to that he would reach." The same fire expressed itself in all he did. He was passionately fond of all boyish sports, and there was no bodily feat he undertook which he did not finally perform better than others of his age performed it. He could leap, run, fence, shoot at a mark; there was no horse he could not ride, and at ten he stood as tall as a boy of fourteen, and was stalwart and graceful into the bargain. Of his beauty there could be no question, it being of an order which marked him in any assembly. 'Twas not only that his features were of so fine a moulding, that his thick hair curled about his brow in splendid rings, and that he had a large deep eye, tawny brown and fearless as a young

lion's, but there was in the carriage of his head, the bearing of his body, the very movement of his limbs a thing which stamped him. In truth, it was as if nature, in a lavish mood and having leisure, had built a human creature of her best and launched him furnished forth with her fairest fortunes, that she might behold what he would do. The first time he was taken by his parents to London, there was a day upon which, while walking in the garden of Hampton Court, accompanied by his governor, he found himself stopped by a splendid haughty lady, whom Mr. Fox saluted with some fearfulness when she addressed him. She asked the boy's name, and, putting her hand on his shoulder, so held him that she might look at him well.

"The little Roxholm," she said. "Yes, his mother was the beauty who--"

'Twas as if she checked her speech. She made a quick, imperious movement with her head, and added: "He is all rumour said of him;" and she turned away with such abruptness that the child asked himself how he had vexed her, and wondered also at her manners, he being used only to grace and courtesy.

They were near the end of the terrace which looked upon the River Thames, and she went with her companion and leaned upon the stone balustrades, looking out upon the water with fierce eyes. "The woman who could give him a son like that," she said, "could hold him against all others, and demand what she chose. Squat Catherine herself could do it."

Little Roxholm heard her.

"She is a very handsome lady," he said, innocently, "though she has a strange way. Is she of the Court, and do you know her name?"

"'Tis her Grace the Duchess of Cleveland," answered Mr. Fox, gravely, as they walked away.

He was seven years old at this time, and 'twas during this visit to town that he heard a conversation which made a great impression upon him, opening up as it did new vistas of childish thinking. Having known but one phase of existence, he was not aware that he had lived the life of a young prince in a fairy tale, and that there were other children whose surroundings were as gloomy as his were fair and bright.

He was one day comfortably ensconced in the deep embrasure of a window, a book upon his knee, when Mistress Halsell and one of the upper servants came into the room upon which his study opened, and presently his ear was attracted by a thing they were speaking of with some feeling.

"As sweetly pretty a young lady as ever one beheld," he heard. "Never saw I a fairer skin or eyes more hyacinth-blue--and her hair trailing to the ground like a mantle, and as soft and fine as silk."

'Twas this which made him stop in his reading. The description seeming so like that of a beauty in a story of chivalry in which knights fought for such loveliness.

"And now," the voice went on, "after but a few years of marriage all her beauty lost so that none would know her! Four poor, weak girl infants she hath given birth to, and her husband, Sir Jeffry, in a fury at the coming of each, raging that it is not an heir. Before the first came he had begun to slight her, and when 'twas born a girl he well-nigh broke her heart. He is a great, bold, handsome man, and she, poor little lady, hopeless in her worship of him. And the next year there was another girl, and each year since--and Sir Jeffry spends his time in riot and drinking and ill-living--and she fades away in her wing of the house, scarce ever seen."

"Poor, uncared-for thing, 'twould be happier if God took her, and her children, too," said Mistress Halsell.

"Three have been taken," replied her companion, in a low voice.

"Neither she nor they have strength. And ah! to see her in these days--her pretty face grown thin and haggard, the blue of her eyes drenched out with weeping. 'Tis told he once said to her, 'When a woman grows thin and yellow, her husband will go in search of better looks, and none has right to blame him.' 'Twas on a day when she had dressed herself in her best to please him, but a few weeks after her third infant came into the world. And so weak was she, poor lady, and so hurt

in spirit, that she gave a little sob and swooned."

The young Marquess read his book no more. He drew down his handsome childish brow and stared straight before him through the window. He was a boy with a fiery spirit, despite his general amiability of demeanour, and, had he lived among tormentors and tyrants and been ill-treated, would have had an ungovernable temper. The thing he had heard filled him with a kind of rage against this big handsome man who treated his lady cruelly and hated her infants. 'Twas all brutal and wicked and unfair, as if one should heartlessly beat a little dog that loved one. The picture brought before him was hideous and made him grow hot. His spirit had never been tamed, he had the blood of fighting men in his veins, and he had read innumerable stories of chivalry. He wished he were big enough to go forth in search of such men as this Sir Jeffry, and strike them to the earth with his sword.

On such evenings as their Graces did not entertain, he was taken by his governour to spend an hour with his father and mother in the withdrawing-room, where they sat, and on this evening, when he went to them, each of them observed that he spoke less than usual and seemed in a new mood. He had always been filled with a passionate adoration of his mother, and was much given to following her with his eyes; but this night his gaze was fixed upon her in such earnest scrutiny that at last her Grace asked him laughingly what he saw in her looks more than ordinary. He had kept very close to her, and had held her hand, and kissed it more than once since he had been in the room. He lifted it to

his lips again now, and pressed an impassioned kiss upon its fairness.

"You were never treated cruelly," he said. "No one would ever dare to speak so to you that you would sob and swoon. If any dared!" and his little hand involuntarily went to his side with a fierce childish gesture which made my lord Duke laugh delightedly.

"'Tis in his blood to draw," he said. "Bravo! Roxholm; bravo!"

His mother looked at his beautiful little face and, seeing a thing in his eyes which women who are mothers detect in the eyes of their offspring when others observe little, put a hand on each of his shoulders and went upon one knee so that she could be on a level with his face and see deeper.

"What," she said, with a tender comprehending warmth, "you have been hearing of some poor lady who is hardly treated, and you cannot endure to think of it, because you are a man even though you are but seven years old;" and she bent forward and kissed him with a lovely passion and her violet eyes bedewed. "Yes, love," she said, "you are a Man. All Osmondes are when they are born, I think. Indeed, John"--with the sweetest laughing look at her lord, who stood worshipping her from his place at the opposite side of the hearth--"I am sure that when you were seven years old, if you had had a little sword, you would have drawn it to defend a woman against a giant, though he had been big enough to have eaten you at one mouthful--and Gerald is like you," proudly.

"Gerald is a Man, too."

"'Tis not fair," cried little Roxholm, passionately, "'tis not fair that a big gentleman should be so harsh to a poor lady who loves him, that he should make her cry till the blue goes from her eyes and she is beautiful no longer, and that he should hate her infants because they are not boys. And when she tried to please him he made her sob and swoon away. He should be killed for it--he should be killed."

His father and mother glanced at each other. "Surely," her Grace said, "he must have heard of the wicked Gloucestershire baronet my Lord Dunstanwolde told us stories of--Sir Jeffry."

"Ay, his name was Sir Jeffry," cried Roxholm, eagerly. "Sir Jeffry it was they said."

"Yes," said my lord Duke, "Sir Jeffry Wildairs, and a rank, heartless brute he is to be the father of helpless girl children."