CHAPTER IV

"God Have Mercy on its Evil Fortunes"

In the constantly changing panorama which passes before the mind of a child, it is certain no picture dawns and fades without leaving some trace behind. The exact images may not be recorded, but the effect produced by their passing will remain and become part of the palimpsest of life and character. The panorama which passed before the mental vision of the boy Marquess during the years of his early youth was not only brilliant but full of great changes, being indeed such a panorama as could not fail to produce strong and formative impressions upon a growing mind. The doings of Charles Stuart's dissolute and brilliant Court he began life hearing stories of; before he had reached ten years of age, King Charles had died and James the Second was ruler of England; in three years more his Majesty had been deserted by all and had fled to the protection of Louis of France, leaving his crown behind him to be offered to and accepted by William of Orange and Mary, his well-beloved wife; but four years later Queen Mary had died of small-pox and left her husband overwhelmed with grief, crying that he had been the happiest of men and was now the most miserable. Kings are not made and deposed, crowned and buried and mourned, without pomps, ceremonials, and the occurring of events which must move even the common mind to observation and reflection. This young mind was of no common mould, it having come into the world active and by nature ready

to receive impressions, and from its earliest consciousness had been watched and cultured in such manner as must have enriched even the poorest understanding. As children of ordinary rank are familiar with games, and hear of simple every-day events that happen to their neighbours, this heir to a dukedom was familiar with the game of Courts and rulers and heard daily discussion of Kings and great statesmen--of their rights and wrongs, their triumphs and failures. The changing events made such discussion inevitable, and the boy, being through their wise affection treated almost as the companion of his parents, heard much important conversation which filled him with deep interest and led him into grave thinking which greatly developed his powers of mind. Among the many memories which remained with him throughout his life, and which in his later years he realised, had left a singularly definite image upon his mind, was this small incident of his first hearing of the Gloucestershire baronet whose lady had wept the blue from her eyes in her wretchedness under his brutal neglect and cruelty. The impression doubtless owed much of its vividness to the fact that 'twas made so early as to be the first realising of the existence of a world where misery dwelt as a common thing, where men were coarse and cruel, where women were tyrannised over and treated roughly, and where children were unloved and neglected. Into this world he had previously obtained no glimpse; but, once having realised its existence, he could not easily forget it. Often as time passed he found himself haunted by thoughts of the poor injured lady and her children, and being a creature of strong imagination, there would rise before him mental pictures of what a household might be whose master was a coarse rioter

before whom his wife and children cowered in fear.

So it happened in his conversing with Mistress Halsell he broached the subject of the Gloucestershire baronet, and the good woman, seeing that his speech did not arise from idle curiosity, told him what she knew of this most unhappy family.

'Twas an old family and a good one in the matter of lineage, but through the debaucheries of the last baronets its estates had become impoverished and its reputation of an ill savour. It had ever been known as a family noted for the great physical strength and beauty of its men and women. For centuries the men of the house of Wildairs had been the biggest and the handsomest in England. They had massive frames, black eyes, thick hair and beards, and feared neither man nor devil, but openly defied both. They were men who lived wildly, ate and drank hugely, pursued women, were great at all deeds of prowess, and bursting with rough health and lawless high spirits. 'Twas a saying of their house that "a Wildairs who could not kill an ox with a blow and eat half of him when he was roasted, was a poor wight indeed." The present baronet, Sir Jeoffry, was of somewhat worse reputation than any Sir Jeoffry before him. He lived a wild life in the country, rarely going up to town, as he was not fond of town manners and town customs, but liked better hunting, coursing, cock-fighting, bull-baiting, and engaging in intrigues with dairy maids and the poppy-cheeked daughters of his cottagers. He had married a sweet creature of fifteen, whom after their brief honeymoon he had neglected as such men neglect a

woman, leaving her to break her heart and lose her bloom and beauty in her helpless mourning for his past passion for her. He was at drawn swords with his next of kin, who despised him and his evil, rough living, and he had set his mind upon leaving sons enough to make sure his title should be borne only by his own offspring. He being of this mind, 'twas not to be wondered at that he had no welcome for the daughters who should have pleased him by being sons. When the first was born he flouted its mother bitterly, the poor young lady, who was but sixteen and a delicate creature, falling into a fit of illness through her grief and disappointment. The coming of the second threw him into a rage, the third into a fury; and the birth of a fourth being announced, he stormed like a madman, would not look at it, and went upon a debauch so protracted and disgraceful as to be the scandal of the county and the subject of gossip for many a day.

From that hour the innocent Lady Wildairs did not raise her head. Her family had rejected her on account of her marriage with a rake so unfashionable and of reputation so coarse. Wildairs Hall, ill kept, and going to ruin through the wasteful living of its spendthrift master, was no place for such guests as were ladies and gentlemen. The only visitors who frequented it were a dozen or so chosen spirits who shared Sir Jeoffry's tastes--hunted, drank, gambled with him, and were as loose livers as himself. My Lady Wildairs, grown thin, yellow, and haggard, shrank into her own poor corner of the big house, a bare west wing where she bore her children in lonely suffering and saw them die, one after the other, two only having the strength to survive. She was

her lord's hopeless slave, and at the same time the mere knowledge of her existence was an irritation to him, she being indeed regarded by him as a Sultan might regard the least fortunate of his harem.

"Damn her," he cried once to one of his cronies, a certain Lord Eldershaw, "in these days I hate the sight of her, with her skinny throat and face. What's a woman for, after she looks like that? If she were not hanging about my neck I could marry some fine strapping girl who would give me an heir before a year was out."

If young Roxholm did not hear this special anecdote, he heard others from various sources which were productive in him of many puzzled and somewhat anxious thoughts. "Why was it," he pondered, "that women who had not the happy fortune of his mother seemed at so cruel a disadvantage--that men who were big and handsome having won them, grew tired of them and cast them aside, with no care for their loneliness and pain? Why had God so made them that they seemed as helpless as poor driven sheep? 'Twas not fair it should be so--he could not feel it honest, though he was beset by grave fears at his own contumacy since he had been taught that God ordained all things. Had he ordained this, that men should be tyrants, and base, and cruel, and that women should be feeble victims who had but the power to moan and die and be forgotten? There was my Lord Peterborough, who had fought against Algerine pirates, and at nineteen crowned his young brow with glory in action at Tripoli. To the boyish mind he was a figure so brilliant and gallant and to be adored that it seemed impossible to allow that his

shining could be tarnished by a fault, yet 'twas but a year after his marriage with the fair daughter of Fraser of Mearns that he had wearied of his love and gaily sailed for the Algerine coast again. Whether the young Countess had bewailed her lot or not, Roxholm had not chanced to hear, but having had for husband a young gentleman so dazzling and full of fascination, how could she have found herself deserted and feel no heartache and shed no tears? My lord could sail away and fight corsairs, but her poor ladyship must remain behind and do battle only with her heart, gaining no laurels thereby.

The sentiment of the times was not one which rated women high or was fraught with consideration for female weakness. Charles Stuart taught men how women should be regarded, and the beauties of his Court had aided him in such manner as deepened the impression he had produced. A beauty had her few years of triumph in which she was pursued, intrigued with, worshipped, flattered, had madrigals sung in her honour; those years over, no one cared to hear of the remainder of her life. If there were dregs left in her cup, she drank them alone. A woman who had no beauty was often a mere drudging or child-bearing wife, scapegoat for ill-humour and morning headaches; victim, slave, or unnoticed appendage. This the whilom toast Lady Wildairs had become, and there were many like her.

The Earl of Dunstanwolde, who was the nobleman who had spoken to the Duke and Duchess of the Gloucestershire Baronet, was a distant kinsman, and a somewhat frequent visitor both at their Graces' country estates

and at their town establishment, Osmonde House. His own estate was near Gloucestershire, and he knew the stories of Wildairs Hall, as did so many others.

This gentleman was somewhat past middle age, and was the owner of such qualities of mind and heart as had won for him the friendship of all thinking persons who knew him. A man of kindly refinement and dignity, familiar with arts and letters, and generous in his actions both to his equals and his inferiors, he was of ancient blood, and had large estates in the country and a great house in town.

But, notwithstanding the honourableness of his position, and the ease of his circumstances, he was not a happy gentleman, having made a love-match in his youth, and lost his passionately worshipped consort at the birth of her first child, who had lived but two hours. He had been so happy in his union that, being of a constant nature, he could not console himself for his bereavement, and had remained a widower, content that his estates and titles should pass to a distant cousin who was the next heir. He was a sad-faced gentleman with delicately cut features, and eyes which looked as if they had beheld sorrow, there being deep lines about them, and also about his mouth.

This nobleman had for Roxholm a great attraction--his voice, his bearing, and his gentle gravity all seemed to convey a thing which reached the boy's heart. On his own part the childless man had from the first felt for his little kinsman a pathetic affection. Had fate been

kind, instead of cruel, the son of his own Alice might have so bloomed and grown stalwart and fair. He liked to talk with the child even when he was but a few years old, and as time passed, and he shot up into a handsome, tall lad, their friendship became a singularly close one. When my lord was at Camylott the country people became accustomed to seeing the two ride through the lanes together, the gamekeepers in the park were familiar with the sight of the elder gentleman and the young Marquess walking side by side down unfrequented woodland paths engaged in earnest conversation, his lordship's hand oftenest resting on the young shoulder as they went.

There was a subject of which these two talked often, and with great interest, it being one for which Roxholm had always felt a love, since the days when he had walked through the picture gallery with his nurse, looking up with childish delight at the ladies and gentlemen in the family portraits, asking to be told stories of their doings, and requiring that it be explained to him why they wore costumes which seemed strange to him. Mistress Halsell had been able to tell him many stories of them, as also had his father and mother and Mr. Fox, his governour, and these stories had so pleased him that he had pondered upon them until their heroes and heroines seemed his familiar friends, and made of as firm flesh and real blood as the ladies and gentlemen who were his kinswomen and kinsmen to-day. It had always been his pleasure to remember that the stories to be told of them were such fine ones. There were Crusaders among them who had done splendid deeds; there were men who had fought by the side of their King in battle, and

there were those who had done high service for him with brain and spoken word when his power stood in danger of being overthrown. To the boy there seemed indeed to have been no battle either of Church or State, or with enemies in open field in which Mertouns had not fought. Long before the Conquest, Normandy had known their high-strung spirit and fiery valour. At Senlac, Guilbert de Mertoun had stood near William of Normandy when he gave his command to his archers that they should shoot into the air, whereby an arrow sought English Harold for its mark and pierced him through eye and brain, leaving him slain, and William conqueror. This same Guilbert, William had loved for his fierce bravery and his splendid aim in their hunting the high deer, of whom 'twas said the monarch "loved them as if he had been their father;" and when the Domesday Book was made, rich lands were given to him that, as the King said--there should be somewhat worthy of his holding to be recorded therein. It had been a Guilbert de Mertoun who rode with Rufus when he would cross to Normandy to put down insurrection there. These two were alike in their spirit (therefore little Roxholm had ever worshipped both), and when they reached the seashore in a raging storm, and the sailors, from fear, refused to put forth, and Rufus cried, "Heard ye ever of a King who was drowned," 'twas Guilbert who sprang forward swearing he would set sail himself if others would not, and so stirred the cowards with his fierce passionate courage that they obeyed the orders given them and crossed the raging sea's arm in the tempest, Guilbert standing in their midst spurring them with shouts, while the wind so raged that only a man of giant strength could have stood upright, and his voice could scarce be heard above its fury. And 'twas

he who was at the front when the insurgents were overpowered. Of this one, of whom 'twas handed down that he was of huge build, and had beard and hair as flaming as Rufus's own, there were legends which made him the idol of Roxholm's heart in his childhood. Again and again it had been his custom to demand that they should be repeated to him--the stories of the stags he had pierced to the heart in one day's hunting in the New Forest--the story of how he was held in worship by his villeins, and of his mercifulness to them in days when nobles had the power of life and death, and to do any cruelty to those in servitude to them.

In Edward the Third's time, when the Black Death swept England, there had lived another Guilbert who, having for consort a lovely, noble lady, they two had hand in hand devoted themselves to battling the pestilence among their serfs and retainers, and with the aid of a brother of great learning (the first Gerald of the house) had sought out and discovered such remedies as saved scores of lives and modified the sufferings of all. At the end of their labours, when the violence of the plague was assuaged, the lovely lady Aloys had died of the fatigues she had borne and her husband had devoted himself to a life of merciful deeds, the history of which was a wondrous thing for an impassioned and romance-loving boy to pore over.

Upon the romances of these lives the imagination of the infant Roxholm had nourished itself, and the boy Roxholm being so fed had builded his young life and its ideals upon them.

It was of these ancestors of his house and of their high deeds he found pleasure and profit in talking to his kinsman and friend, and 'twas an incident which took place during one of my Lord Dunstanwolde's visits to Camylott which led them to this manner of converse.

Roxholm was but eleven years old when in taking a barred gate on a new horse the animal leapt imperfectly and, falling upon his rider, broke a leg and two ribs for him. The injuries were such as all knew must give the boy sharp anguish of body, when he was placed upon a hurdle and carried home. His father galloped to the Tower to break the news to her Grace and prepare her for his coming. My Lord Dunstanwolde walked by the hurdle side, and as he did so, watching the boy closely, he was touched to see that though his beautiful young face was white as death and he lay with closed eyes, he uttered no sound and his lips wore a brave smile.

"Is your pain great, Roxholm?" my Lord asked with tender sympathy.

Roxholm opened his eyes and, still smiling, blushed faintly.

"I think of John Cuthbert de Mertoun," he said in a low voice. "It aids me to hold the torment at bay."

He spoke the words with some shyness, as if feeling that one older than himself might smile at the romantic wildness of his fancy. But this my

Lord Dunstanwolde did not, understanding him full well, and lying a hand on his pressed it with warm affection. The story of John Cuthbert was, that a hound suddenly going mad one day while he hunted deep in the forest, it had attacked a poor follower and would have torn his throat had his lord not come to his rescue, pulling the beast from him and drawing its fury upon himself, whereby in his battle with it he was horribly bitten; and when the animal lay dead upon the sward he drew his hunting-knife and cut out the mangled flesh with his own hand, "and winced not nor swouned," as the chronicle recorded with open joy in him.

'Twas while Roxholm lay in bed recovering of his injuries that his kinsman referred to this again, asking him what thoughts he had had of this hero and wherein he had felt them an aid, and the boy's answers and the talk which followed them had been the beginning of many such conversations, his Lordship finding the young mind full of vigour and fine imagination. Often, as they conversed in after times, the older man was moved by the courageous fancies and strong, high ideals he found himself confronting. 'Twas all so brave and beautiful, and there was such tragedy in the thought that life might hold clouds to dull the gold of it. 'Tis but human that those of maturer years who have known sorrow should be reminded of it by the very faith and joyfulness of youth. One of the fine features of the Tower of Camylott was its Long Gallery, which was of such length and breadth and so finely panelled as to be renowned through all the land. At each end the broad windows looked out upon noble stretches of varying hill and tall and venerable

forest, and in wet weather, when the house was full the ladies and gentlemen would promenade there, chatting or sometimes playing games to amuse themselves.

In such weather my Lord Dunstanwolde and his young kinsman sometimes paced whole mornings away together, and 'twas on such an occasion that there first entered into Roxholm's life that which later filled and ruled it and was its very self. But at this time he was scarcely fourteen, and 'twas but the first strange chapter of a story he heard, in no way dreaming that 'twas one of which his own deepest pain and highest raptures would be part.

Often as the years passed, my Lord Dunstanwolde looked back upon this December day and remembered how, as they walked to and fro, he had marked for the hundredth time how beautiful and picturesque a figure the boy made in his suit of rich-coloured brocade, his curling, warm brown hair falling on his shoulders in thick, natural curls such as no perruquier could imitate, the bloom of health and out-door life upon his cheek, his handsome, well-opened eye sparkling or melting in kindly warmth as he conversed. He was a tall, straight-limbed lad, and had by this time attained such height and so bore himself that there were but few inches between his noble kinsman and himself, though the years between them were so many, and my Lord Dunstanwolde was of no mean stature.

Outside a heavy rain fell, deluging the earth and drenching such grass

as the winter had left, covering with its faded tussocks the sweep of the park lands. The sky was heavy with leaden clouds from which the water fell in sweeping dashes. Having walked for some time, the two stopped before the wide bay window at the east end of the Long Gallery and watched the deluge for a space, marking how the drops splashed upon the terrace, how the birds flew before it, and how the deer huddled together under the stripped trees as if glad of the small shelter their trunks and bare branches could afford.

"Such a day brings back to a man the gloomiest things he knows," said Lord Dunstanwolde after a few moments' silent gazing upon the scene. "I no sooner paused here to look forth at the greyness than there came back to me a hard tale I heard before I left Gloucestershire. 'Twas another tale of Wildairs, Gerald."

"Of Sir Jeoffry?" said Roxholm, with interest. It had happened that some time before Lord Dunstanwolde had heard of the impression made upon him by the story of the poor lady and her brutal lord and master. More than once they had spoken together of Wildairs Hall, and those who rioted, and those who suffered, in it, and Roxholm had learned that, year by year the Gloucestershire baronet's living had grown wilder and more dissolute, until his mad follies had cut him off from the companionship of all reputable persons, and he spent his days in brutal sports, drink, and rough entertainment with a dozen men as little respected as himself. His money he had squandered and gambled away at dice, his estate fell to greater ruin every year, and no heir had come

to him, his poor helpmeet having at length given him eight daughters, but two of whom had lived. His rage at this had increased even beyond its first fury as he realised that each new blunder of her ladyship was a new jest for the county. So it was that the boy turned towards his kinsman with interest, for in some manner the mishaps of this wretched family always moved him.

"Of Sir Jeoffry?" he said.

"Of Sir Jeoffry," my Lord Dunstanwolde answered; "but not so much of himself as of his poor lady. At last she is dead."

"Dead!" Roxholm exclaimed. "Dead!" and his voice fell, and he stood a moment and watched the driving rain, full of strange thoughts.

"'Tis happier for her, surely," he said. "I--one cannot feel sorrow for her. How did she die, my lord?"

"As woefully and as neglected as she lived," his lordship answered. "She had given birth to another female infant, and 'twas plain the poor thing knew her last hour had come. She was alone with the one ignorant woman who was all she had to aid her in her hour of trial. The night before Sir Jeoffry had held a drinking bout with a party of his boon companions, and in the morning, when they were gathered noisily in the courtyard to go forth hunting, the old woman appeared in their midst to acquaint her master of the infant's birth and to bring a message from

her mistress, who begged her lord to come to her before he rode forth, saying that she felt strangely ill, and wished greatly to see him." His lordship paused a moment, and a shadow passed swiftly across his countenance, brought there by a sad memory.

Young Roxholm turned towards him and waited with a speaking look for his next words.

"Then--my lord--?" he broke forth inquiringly. Lord Dunstanwolde passed his hand over his forehead.

"He would not go," he answered; "he would not go. He sent a ribald message to the poor soul--cursing the child she had brought into the world, and then he rode away. The servants say that the old woman had left her mistress alone in her chamber and came down to eat and drink. When she went back to her charge the fire had gone out--the room was cold as the grave, and the poor lady lay stone dead, her head fallen upon her wailing infant's body in such manner that, had not the child been stronger than most new-born things and fought for its life, it would have been smothered in its first hour."

The boy Marquess turned suddenly away and took several hurried steps up the Long Gallery. When he returned his forehead was flushed, his eyes sparkled with an inward fire, and his breath came quickly--but he found no words to utter.

"Once," said Lord Dunstanwolde, slowly, "I saw a tender creature die after her travail--but she was beloved to worship, and our hearts stood still in our bosoms as we waited. Mine has truly never seemed to beat since then. Her child--who might, perchance, have aided me to live again, and who would have been my hope and joy and pride, died with her. This poor thing, unwanted, hated, and cast aside to live or die--as if it were the young of some wild creature of the woods--this one, they say, has the strength of ten, and will survive. God have mercy on its evil fortunes."

Young Roxholm stood with folded arms gazing straight before him again into the driving rain. His brow was knit, and he was biting his boyish red lip.

"Is there mercy?" he said in a low voice, at length. "Is there justice, since a human thing can be so cast into the world--and left alone?"

Lord Dunstanwolde put his hand upon his shoulder.

"All of us ask," he said. "None of us knows."