

CHAPTER V

My Lord Marquess Plunges into the Thames

A rich young nobleman at the University of Oxford, who, having all the resources of wealth and rank at his disposal, chose in these times to devote himself to scholarly pursuits, made in the minds of his fellow-collegians a singular and eccentric figure; but that one, more splendidly endowed by fortune than any other, should so comport himself, and yet no man find it possible to deride or make coarse jokes on him, was, indeed, unheard of.

Yet, when the young heir of the house of Osmonde entered the University, this was the position he held and which none disputed. There were gay young rakes and ardent young toadies who, hearing of his coming among them, fell into anticipation: the first, of more splendid frolics, the second, of richer harvests; and though each party was disappointed in its expectation, neither found opportunity to display its chagrin according to the customary methods.

It is, indeed, a strange thing, how a man's physical body may be his fortress or his enemy. All the world has at times beheld those whom an insignificant figure and an ill-modelled face handicapped with a severity cruel to the utmost. A great man but five feet high, and awkward of bearing, has always added to his efforts at accomplishing

great deeds the weight of an obstacle which he must first remove from about his neck--the obstacle his own poor exterior creates. An eloquent man whose voice is cracked and harsh by nature must be fire itself before he can burn away the barrier between himself and his hearers; a prophet with an ignobly featured countenance and a small, vague eye must needs be a god of wisdom to persuade his disciples that high nobleness can dwell in a temple so mean and poor. The physical body of the young Marquess of Roxholm was a fortress well-nigh impregnable. 'Tis not well to take liberties with a creature who takes none himself, and can strike a blow which would fell an ox, if need be. Besides this, there was in this young man's look and temper a something which, while it forbade idle familiarities, won to itself the pleasurable admiration and affection of all beholders. His eye was full of fire and meaning, of laughter and friendliness; his mouth curved into the finest sweet smile in the world, as also it could curl into a look of scorn which could scathe as finely. He had a keen wit, and could be ironic and biting when he chose, but 'twas not his habit to use his power malevolently. Even those who envied his great fortunes, and whose spite would have maligned him had he been of different nature, were in a measure restrained from their bitterness by a certain powerful composure, which all felt who looked on him and heard him speak.

'Twas this composure and commandingness of bearing which were more marked in him than all else. 'Twas not mere coolness, but a great power over himself and all his weaknesses, which years of self-study had begot in him, the truth being indeed that he himself had early realised

in a measure a thing one of the gravest instructors at the University had once said: "Were all the strength of his great body and his fervid mind, all the power of his wealth and rank, all the influence of his beauty and passion turned to evil and dishonourable courses, instead of to more noble things, good God! what a devil he might be--devil enough to ruin half England. What weak woman could resist him; what vicious man help following where he led!"

"'Tis not so easy for a man who will be Duke one day to keep straight courses," Roxholm had once said to Mr. Fox, "as 'tis for a man who must live a narrower life and work for his daily bread. And a man who is six feet three in height has six feet and three inches of evil to do battle with, if he has not six feet three of strength and honesty to fight for him. 'Tis Gerald Mertoun I may live in dread of, if Gerald Mertoun is not my help and stay."

This he said half laughing, half sober, after his first visit to the French Court, which he made with his parents and saw many strange though brilliant things, giving him cause for reflection. Tender as his years were at the time, he was so big and finely built a fellow for his age, and so beautiful to look upon, that there were ladies who even tried their bright eyes upon him as if he had been a man instead of a youth; and he encountered many youngsters of his years who had already done much more than dally on the brink of life, some, indeed, having plunged deep into waters not overclean.

Some of these last regarded him at least as one who neglected his opportunities, but his great laugh at their callow jests and their advice to him was so frank and indifferent a thing that they found it singularly baffling. 'Twas indeed as if a man of ripe years and wisdom had laughed at them with good-nature, because he knew they could not understand the thing experience had taught him.

"Why should I be pleased because a beauty older than my mother laughs and teases me," he said. "I am but a boy, and she knows it full well, and would only play with me to see if I am a fool who can be made a toy. I am too big," stretching his great arms, "to sit at ladies' feet and have my curls stroked as if I were a lap-dog. A fellow such as I should be exercising his body and putting somewhat in his brain. Why should I overdrink and overfeed myself and give my strength to follies? 'Tis not my taste. On my life, I would rather get up at daybreak with a clean tongue and a clear head and go out to leap and ride and fence and toss the bar with well-strung muscles. Some day I shall meet a beauty whom I would be ready for." And he laughed his big, musical, boyish laugh again and his tawny eye sparkled.

At the University there were temptations enough to lead youth to folly, even when it was not such youth as his, and therefore a shining mark. The seed Charles Stuart had sown had flourished and grown rank and strong, so that the great seat of learning was rich with dissolute young fools and madcaps and their hangers-on. But even the most foolish swaggerer of them could not call milksop a man who could outride,

outleap, outfence, outhunt him; who could drive the four horses of his coach to London and back at such a pace and in such a manner as made purple-faced old stage-coach drivers shake their heads with glee, and who, in a wrestling-match, could break a man's back at a throw if he chose to be unmerciful. Besides this, he was popular for a score of reasons, being no sanctimonious preacher of his doctrines, but as joyous a liver as any among them and as open-handed and high of spirit.

"'Tis not for me to say how other men should live," was his simple and straightforward creed. "I live as I like best and find best pays me. 'Tis for others to seek out and follow what best pays themselves."

Many a story was told of him which his fellows liked, youth always being elated by any deed of prowess and daring in youth. One of these stories, which was indeed no great one, but picturesque and pretty, took their fancy greatly, and was much related and laughed gaily over, and indeed beloved.

He was a strong and wondrous swimmer, having learned the art in his childhood on the seacoast, being taught by his Grace his father. When at Oxford it was his custom to rise before the rest of the world, and in any weather or season plunge into the river and swim and dive and play in the water like a young river god. He had chosen a favourite swimming-spot and would undress under cover of the trees and then dash out to his pastime, and it so chanced that going there one hot afternoon he fell upon an adventure.

A party of jolly personages of the middle class, who had come up from town on pleasure and rollicking interest, were taking a jaunt upon the river in a wherry. 'Twas a wedding-party, and both males and females, having dined at a tavern, were well filled with ale and in the mood for disporting themselves. The groom and his men friends, being in frolicsome humour and knowing nothing whatever of oarsmanship, were playing great pranks to make the women scream at their daring. The bride, a pretty thing in cherry ribbands, clung to the boat's side in amaze at the heroic swagger of her new lord, but her cheeks, which had matched her ribbands, grew paler at each rock and dip of the boat, and her fear forced little shrieks from her. Her companions shrieked too, but laughingly and in such manner as but spurred the men to greater follies. The sport was at its highest and noisiest when they neared the spot all Oxford knew by this time by the name of "my Lord Marquess's diving hole." At this point the river was broad and deep, and not far below it the water washed over a weir near which was a post bearing a board marked "Danger!" To those who knew the waters and had some skill with their oars there was no peril, but to a crew of drink-filled junketers it was an ill-omened place. The wedding-party was too wild and young and rollicking to observe the sign-board. The men rocked the boat, shouted and sang, the women squealed and laughed and shouted with them; the little bride burst forth weeping, shrieking wildly the next moment as the wherry was overset, and the whole party struggled in the water, the hat, with its cherry-ribbands, floating on the top.

Some distance above there were people walking. Shrieks filled the air and roused all within sight to running and shouting. Poor gasping, choking, deadly faced heads bobbed up a moment on the river's surface and went under struggling.

"Help! Help!" shouted the running people. "God save them all! Good Lord! Good Lord!" And in the midst of it out sprang from among the trees and bushes the great white body of a man, who dashed into the stream and swam like a dolphin.

If he had been clothed the drowning creatures would have had somewhat to drag upon--if he had not been as strong as a giant and cool enough to control them, the poor strangling fools would have so hampered him in their frenzy that they might have dragged him under water with them. But there was a power in him and a freedom from all sense of peril which dominated them all.

"Keep your senses and you are safe," he shouted, swimming and pushing the overturned boat within reach of the men, who struggled together.

His voice rang like a clarion and held in it such encouragement that the poor little bride, who came up gasping near him at that moment, almost took him for a god as he shot to her rescue.

"Your hand on my shoulder; be brave, my girl--be brave," he cried out with such good cheer as would have put heart in any woman and aided her

to gather her poor frightened wits and obey him like a child, while even in the midst of her terror, as her little red hands clung to him, she marked, half unconsciously the beauty and vigour of him--his strong white neck like a column, the great corded muscles of his white arms as he clove the water through.

He bore her to the shore and left her safe there, and plunged in again, crying to her, over his shoulder: "I will bring back the others!" And she stood dripping, gazing after him, sobbing and wringing her hands, but filled with wild admiration and amaze.

He shouted orders to the sobered men to hold steady to the wherry and dived to bring back one woman after another to firm land; a boat found in the osiers was put forth above, and in time all were brought to shore, though the bridegroom, who had not come near enough to the wherry, was dragged in looking like a dead man.

The bride flung herself upon his body, shrieking and kissing him. The people who had run up crowded about in senseless excitement and would have kept all air away. But there was one among them who had his wits clear and ordered them off, plainly remembering not for a moment that his brocades and laces lay hid among the trees, and he stood among them as Apollo stands in marble.

"Bring brandy," he commanded the nearest. "Stand back; strip his clothes from him and empty the water from his stomach. Here," to a

matron who had come up panting, "take his wife away."

The good woman he addressed dropped a hurried curtsey and hustled off the woman under her wing. She led them into the sun and wrung the water from their garments, while they sobbed and choked and wept.

"Hush thee, wench!" she said to the stricken bride. "Hush thee, little fool; my lord Marquess will put life into him and set him on his feet before thy petticoats are dry, Lord! Lord! what a young man! When built Heaven such another? And he a Duke's son!"

"A Marquess!" cried one of the bride's friends. "A Duke's son!" sobbed the bride.

"Ay, a Duke's son!" the good woman cried, exulting further. "And were he a King's, the nation might be proud of him. 'Tis his young lordship the Marquess of Roxholm."