

## CHAPTER VI

"No; She has not yet Come to Court"

'Tis but a small adventure for a youth who is a strong swimmer to save a party of cits from drowning in a river, but 'twas a story much repeated, having a picturesqueness and colour because its chief figure Nature had fitted out with all the appointments which might be expected to adorn a hero.

"'Tis a pretty story, too," said a laughing great lady when 'twas talked of in town. "My lord Marquess dashing in and out of the river, bearing in his big white arms soused little citizen beauties and their half-drowned sweethearts, and towering in their midst giving orders--like a tall young god in marble come to life. The handsomest Marquess in Great Britain, and in France likewise, they tell me."

"The handsomest man," quoth the old Dowager Lady Storms, who had a country seat in Oxfordshire and knew more of the tale than any one else. "The handsomest man, say I, for it chanced that I drove by the river at that moment and saw him."

And then--freedom of speech being the fashion in those days and she an old woman--she painted such a picture of his fine looks, his broad shoulders, and the markings of his muscles under his polished skin, as,

being repeated and spread abroad, as gossip will spread itself, fixed him in the minds of admirers of manly beauty and built him a reputation in the world of fashion before he had entered it or even left his books.

When he did leave them and quitted the University, it was with honour to himself and family, and also with joy to his Governour and Chaplain Mr. Fox, who had attended him. At his coming of age there were feastings and bonfires in five villages again, and Rowe rang the bells at Camylott Church with an exultant ardour which came near to being his final end, and though seventy years of age, he would give up his post to no younger man, and actually blubbered aloud when 'twas delicately suggested that his middle-aged son should take his place to save him fatigue.

"Nay! nay!" he cried; "I rang their Graces' wedding peal--I rang my lord Marquess into the world, and will give him up to none until I am a dead man."

At the Tower there was high feasting, the apartments being filled with guests from foreign Courts as well as from the English one, and as the young hero of the day moved among them, and among the tenantry rejoicing with waving flags and rural games in the park, as he danced with lovely ladies in the ball-room, and as he made his maiden speech to the people, who went wild with joy over him, all agreed that a noble house having such an heir need not fear for its future renown,

howsoever glorious its history might have been in the past.

After he had been presented at Court there seemed nothing this young man might not have asked for with the prospect of getting--a place near the King, a regiment to lead to glory, the hand of the fairest beauty of the greatest fortune and rank. But it seemed that he wanted nothing, for he made no request for any favour which might have brought him place or power or love. The great events at that time disturbing the nation he observed with an interest grave and thoughtful beyond his years. Men who were deep in the problems of statesmanship were amazed to discover the seriousness of his views and the amount of reflection he had given to public questions. Beauties who paraded themselves before him to attract his heart and eye--even sweetly tender ones who blushed when he approached them and sighed when he made his obeisance and retired--all were treated with a like courtesy and grace of manner, but he gave none more reason to sigh and blush, to ogle and languish, than another, the honest truth being that he did not fall in love, despite his youth and the warmth of his nature, not having yet beheld the beauty who could blot out all others for him and reign alone.

"I will not play with love," he said to his mother once as they talked intimately to each other. "I have thought of it--that which should come to a man and be himself, not a part of his being but the very life of him. If it comes not, a man must go unsatisfied to his grave. If it comes--You know," he said, and turned and kissed her hand impulsively, "It came to my father and to you."

"Pray Heaven it may come to you, dear one," she said; "you would know bliss then."

"Yes," he answered, "I should know rapture that would make life Heaven. I do not know what it is I wait for--but when I see it in some woman's eyes I shall know, and so will she."

His mother kissed his ringed hair, smiling softly.

"Till then you wait and think of other things."

"There are so many things for a man to do," he said, "if he would not sit idle. But when that comes it will be first and greatest of all."

At this period all the world talked of the wondrous and splendid Churchill, who, having fought brilliantly for the Stuarts and been made by them first Lord Churchill of Eyemouth, and next Baron Churchill of Sandridge, having, after receiving these advancements, the cold astuteness to see the royal fortunes waver perilously, deserted James the Second with stately readiness and transferred his services to William of Orange. He was rewarded with an earldom and such favour as made him the most shining figure both at the Court of England and in the foreign countries which had learned to regard his almost supernatural powers with somewhat approaching awe.

This man inspired Roxholm with a singular feeling; he in fact exercised over him the fascination he exercised over so many others, but in the case of the young Marquess, wonder and admiration were mixed with other emotions. There were stories so brilliant to be heard of him on all sides, stories of other actions so marvellously ruthless and of things so wondrously mean. Upon a bargain so shameless he had built so wondrous a career--a faithfulness of service so magnificent he had closed with a treachery so base. All greatness and all littleness, all heroism and all crimes, seemed to combine themselves in this one strange being. Having shamelessly sold his youth to a King's mistress, he devoted his splendid maturity to a tender, faithful passion for a beautiful virago, whose displeasure was the sole thing on earth which moved him to pain or fear. In truth 'twas not his genius, his bravery, his victories, which held Roxholm's thought upon him most constantly; 'twas two other things, the first being the marvel of his control over himself, the power with which he held in subjection his passions, his emotions, almost, it seemed, his very thoughts themselves--the power with which he had trained John Churchill to be John Churchill's servant--in peril, in temptation from any weakness to which he did not choose to succumb, in circumstances which, arising without warning, might have caused another man to start, to falter, to change colour, but which he encountered with indomitable calm.

"Tis that I wish to learn," said the young nobleman in his secret thoughts as he watched him at Court, in the world outside it, among soldiers, statesmen, women, in the society of those greater than

himself, of those smaller, of those he would win and of those he would repel. "'Tis that I would learn: to be stronger than my very self, so that naught can betray me--no passion I am tormented by, no anger I would conceal, no lure I would resist. 'Tis a man's self who oftenest entraps him. The traitor once subject, life lies at one's feet."

The second thing which stirred the young observer's interest was the great man's great love. The most parsimonious and mercantile of beings, he had married a poor beauty when fair creatures with fortunes smiled upon him on every side; the most indomitable of spirits, the warrior of whom armies stood in awe, he was the willing subject of a woman whose fiery temper and tempestuous spirit the world knew as well as it knew her beauty and her dominating charm. For some reason he could scarcely have analyzed, it gave Roxholm a strange pleasure to hear anecdotes of the passionate love-letters scrawled on the field--on the eve of battle, the hour after a great encounter and triumph; to know that better than victory to the great conquerer, who could command the slaughter of thousands without the quiver of a muscle or a moment's qualm, were the few lines in a woman's hand which told him he was forgiven for some fancied wrong or missed in some tender hour.

"My Lady Sarah is a handsome creature, and ever was one," 'twas said, "but there are those who are greater beauties, and who have less brimstone in the air about them and less lightning in their eyes."

"But 'twas she who was his own," Roxholm said to himself in pondering

it over, "and when their eyes met each knew--and when she is fierce and torments him 'tis as if the fire in his own blood spoke, as if his own voice reproached him--and he remembers their dear hours together, and forgives, and woos her back to him. If she were not his own--if he were not hers, neither could endure it. They would strike each other dead.

'Tis sure nature makes one man for one woman, one woman for one man--as

it was in the garden where our first parents loved. Few creatures find their mates, alas; but when they do 'tis Eden over again, in spite of all things--and all else is mean and incomplete.

He did not know that, as he had observed and been attracted by the hero, so the hero had been attracted by himself, though 'twas in a lesser degree, since one man was cold and mature and the other young and warm.

My Lord Churchill had been the most beautiful youth of his time, distinguished for the elegance of his bearing and the perfection of his countenance and form. When, at fifteen, the services of his father in the royal cause had procured for him the place of page in the household of the Duke of York, he had borne away the palm from all others of his age. When, at sixteen, his martial instincts had led to the Prince's obtaining for him a commission in a regiment of the guards, his first appearance in his scarlet and gold lace had produced such commotion among the court beauties as promised to lead to results almost disastrous, since he attracted attention in places too high to reach

with safety. But even then his ambitions were stronger than his temptations, and he fled the latter to go to fight the Moors. On his return, more beautiful than ever, the lustre of success in arms added to his ripened charms, the handsomest and wickedest woman in England cast her eyes upon him, and he became the rival of royalty itself. All England knew the story of the founding of his later fortunes, but if he himself blushed for it, none but John Churchill knew--outwardly he was the being whose name was the synonym for success, the lover of the brilliant Castlemaine, the hero of the auxiliary force sent to Louis, the "handsome Englishman" of the siege of Nimeguen for whom Turenne predicted the greatest future a man could dream of.

When Roxholm first had the honour of being presented to this gentleman 'twas at a time when, after a brief period during which the hero's fortunes had been under a cloud, the tide had turned for him and the sun of royal favour shone forth again. Perhaps during certain perilous dark days in the Tower, my Lord Marlborough had passed through hours which had caused him to look back upon the past with some regret and doubting, and when among those who crowded about him when fortune smiled once more--friends, sycophants, place-hunters, and new admirers--he beheld a figure whose youth and physical gifts brought back old memories to him, 'tis possible they awakened in him curious reflections.

"You," he said to Roxholm one day at St. James, "begin the game with all the cards in your hand."



"The game, my lord?" said the youthful Marquess, bowing.

"The game of life," returned the Earl of Marlborough (for so William of Orange had made him nine years before), and his eagle eye rested on the young man with a keen, strange look. "You need not plan and strive for rank and fortune. You were born to them--to those things which will aid a man to gain what he desires, if he is not a flippant idler and has brain enough to create ambitions for him. Most men must spend their youth in building the bridge which is to carry their dreams across to the shore which is their goal. Your bridge was built before you were born. You left Oxford with high honours, they tell me; you are not long of age, you come of a heroic race--what do you think to do, my lord?"

Roxholm met his scrutinizing gaze with that steadiness which ever marked his own. He knew that he reddened a little, but he did not look away.

"I am young to know, my Lord Marlborough," he returned, "but I think to live--to live."

His Lordship slightly narrowed his eyes, and nodded his head.

"Ay," he said, "you will live!"

"There have been soldiers of our house," said Roxholm. "I may fight if

need be, perhaps," bowing, "following your lordship to some greater triumph, if I have that fortune. There may be services to the country at home I may be deemed worthy to devote my powers to when I have lived longer. But," reddening and bowing again, "before men of achievement and renown, I am yet a boy."

"England wants such boys," complimented his lordship, gracefully. "The Partition Treaty and the needs of the Great Alliance call for the breeding of them. You will marry?"

"My house is an old one," replied Roxholm, "and if I live I shall be its chief."

My lord cast a glance about the apartment. It was a gala day and there were many lovely creatures near, laughing, conversing, coquetting, bearing themselves with dignity, airiness, or sweet grace. There were beauties who were brown, and beauties who were fair; there were gay charmers and grave ones, those who were tall and commanding, and those who were small and nymph-like.

"There is none here to match you," he said with an imperturbable gravity ('twas plain he was not trifling, but thinking some serious and unusual thoughts). "A man of your build has needs out of the common. No pretty, idle young thing will do. She should have beauty, and that which is more. 'Tis a strange kinship--marriage. No; she has not yet come to court."

"I will wait until she does," Roxholm answered, and his youthful face was as grave as the hero's own, though if triflers had heard their words, they would have taken their talk for idle persiflage and jest.