

## CHAPTER VIII

In which my Lady Betty Tantillion writes of a Scandal

Scarce two years later, King William riding in the park at Hampton Court was thrown from his horse--the animal stumbling over a mole-hill--and his collar-bone broken. A mole-hill seems but a small heap of earth to send a King to moulder beneath a heap of earth himself, but the fall proved fatal to a system which had long been weakening, and a few days later his Majesty died, commending my Lord Marlborough to the Princess Anne as the guide and counsellor on whose wisdom and power she might most safely rely. Three days after the accession his Lordship was made Captain-General of the English army, and intrusted with power over all warlike matters both at home and abroad. 'Twas a moment of tremendous import--the Alliance shaken by King William's death, Holland panic-stricken lest England should withdraw her protection, King Louis boasting that "henceforth there were no Pyrenees," Whigs and Tories uncertain whether or not to sheath weapons in England, small sovereigns and great ones ready to spring at each other's throats on the Continent. Boldness was demanded, and such executive ability as only a brilliantly daring mind could supply. Without hesitation all power was given into the hands of the man who seemed able to command the Fates themselves. My Lord Marlborough could soothe the fretted vanity of a petty German Prince, he could confront with composure the stupid rancour of those who could not comprehend

him, in the most wooden of heavy Dutchmen he could awaken a slow understanding, the most testy royal temper he knew how to appease, and, through all, wear an air of dignity and grace, sometimes even of sweetness.

"What matter the means if a man gains his end," he said. "He can afford to appear worsted and poor spirited, if through all he sees that which he aims at placing itself within his reach."

"The King of Prussia," said Dunstanwolde as they talked of the hero once, "has given more trouble than any of the allies. He is ever ready to contest a point, or to imagine some slight to his dignity and rank. It has been almost impossible to manage him. How think you my Lord Marlborough won him over? By doing that which no other man--diplomat or soldier--would have had the wit to see the implied flattery of, or the composure to perform without loss of dignity. At a state banquet his testy Majesty dropped his napkin and required another. No attendant was immediately at hand. My Lord Marlborough--the most talked of man in Europe, and some say, at this juncture, as powerful as half a dozen Kings--rose and handed his Majesty the piece of linen as simply as if it were but becoming that he should serve as lackey a royalty so important--and with such repose of natural dignity that 'twas he who seemed majestic, and not the man he waited on. Since then all goes with comparative smoothness. If a Queen's favoured counsellor and greatest general so serves him, the little potentate feels his importance properly valued."

"But if one who knows his Lordship had looked straight in his eyes," said Roxholm, "he could have seen the irony within them--held like a spark of light. I have seen it."

When my Lord Marlborough went to the Hague to take command of the Dutch and English forces, and to draw the German power within the confederacy, he took with him more than one young officer notable for his rank and brilliant place in the world, it having become at this period the fashion to go to the wars in the hope that a young Marlborough might lurk beneath any smart brocade and pair of fine shoulders. Among others, his Lordship was attended on his triumphal way by the already much remarked young Marquess of Roxholm, and it was realized that this fortunate young man went not quite as others did, but as one on whom the chief had fixed his attention, and for whom he had a liking.

In truth, he had marked in him certain powers and qualities, which were both agreeable to his tastes and promised usefulness. He had not employed his own powers and charms, physical and mental, from his fifteenth year upward, without having learned the actual weight and measure of their potency, as a man knows the weight and size of a thing he can put into scales and measure with a yardstick. He remembered well hours, when the fact that he was of a beauteous shape and height, and gazed at others with a superb appealing eye, had made that difference

which lies between failure and success; he had never forgot one of the occasions upon which the power of keeping silence under provocation or temptation, the ability to control each feature and compel it to calm sweetness, had served him as well as a regiment of soldiers might have served him. Each such experience he had retained mentally for future reference. Roxholm possessed this power to restrain himself, and to keep silent, reflecting, and judging meanwhile, and was taller than he, of greater grace, and unconscious state of bearing; his beauty of countenance had but increased as he grew to manhood.

"I was the handsomest lad at Court in the year '65," his Grace of Marlborough said once (he had been made Duke by this time). "The year you were born I was the handsomest man in the army, they used to say--but I was no such beauty and giant as you, Marquess. The gods were en veine when they planned you."

"When I was younger," said Roxholm, "it angered me to hear my looks praised so much; I was boy enough to feel I must be unmanly. But now--'tis but as it should be, that a man should have straight limbs and a great body, and a clean-cut countenance. It should be nature--not a thing to be remarked; it should be mere nature--and the other an unnatural thing. 'Tis cruel that either man or woman should be weak or uncomely. All should be as perfect parts of the great universe as are the mountains and the sun."

"'Tis not so yet," remarked my Lord Marlborough, with his inscrutable

smile. "'Tis not so yet."

"Not yet," said Roxholm. "But let each creature live to make it so--men that they may be clean and joyous and strong; women that they may be mates for them. They should be as strong as we, and have as great courage."

His Lordship smiled again. They were at the Hague at this time and in his quarters, where he was pleased occasionally to receive the young officer with a gracious familiarity. For reasons of his own, he wished to know him well and understand the strengths and weaknesses of his character. Therefore he led him into talk, and was pleased to find that he frequently said things worth hearing, though they were often new and somewhat daring things to be said by one of his age at this period, when 'twas not the custom for a man to think for himself, but either to follow the licentious follies of his fellows or accept without question such statements as his Chaplain made concerning a somewhat unreasoning Deity, His inflexible laws, and man's duty towards Him. That a handsome youth, for example, should, in a serious voice and with a thoughtful face, announce that beauty should be but nature, and ugliness regarded as a disease, instead of humbly submitted to as the will of God, was, indeed, a startling heresy and might have been regarded as impious, even though so gravely said. Therefore it was my Lord Marlborough smiled.

"I spoke to you of marriage once before," he remarked. "You bring it

back to me. Do you care for women?" bluntly.

Roxholm met his eye with his own straight, cool gaze.

"Yes, my Lord," he answered with some grimness, and said no more.

"The one you wait for has not yet come to Court, as I said that day," his Grace went on, and now he was grave again, and had even fallen into a speculative tone. "But it struck me once that I heard of her--though she is no fit companion for you yet--and Heaven knows if she ever will be. The path before her is too full of traps for safety."

Roxholm did not speak. Whether fond of women or not, he was not given to talking of them, and a certain reserve would have prevented his entering upon any discussion of the future Lady Roxholm, whomsoever she might in the future prove to be. He stood in an easy attitude, watching with some vague curiosity the expression of his chief's countenance. But suddenly he found himself checking a slight start, and this was occasioned by his Lordship's next words.

"In the future I shall take pains to hear what befalls her," the Duke said. "In two or three years' time we shall hear somewhat. She will marry a duke--be a King's mistress, or go to ruin in some less splendid and more tragic way. No woman is born into the world with such beauty as they say is hers, and such wild fire in her veins, without setting the world--or herself--in flames. A new Helen of Troy she may be, and

yet she is but the ninth daughter of a drunken Gloucestershire baronet."

'Twas here that Roxholm found himself checking his start, but he had not checked it soon enough to escape the observance of the quickest sighted man in Europe.

"What!" he said, "you have heard of her?"

"I have seen her, your Grace," Roxholm answered, "on the hunting field in Gloucestershire."

"Is she so splendid a young creature as they say? Was she in boy's attire, as we hear her rascal father lets her ride with him?"

"I thought her a boy, and had never seen one like her," said Roxholm, and he was amazed to feel himself disturbed as if he spoke not of a child, but of a beauty of ripe years.

"Is she of such height and strength and wondrous development as rumour tells us?" his Grace continued, still observing him as if with interest. "At twelve years old, 'tis told, she is tall enough for eighteen, and can fence and leap hedges and break horses, and that she plays the tyrant over men four times her age."

"I saw her but once, your Grace," replied Roxholm. "She was tall and

strong and handsome."

"Go and see her again, my lord Marquess," said the Captain-General, turning to his papers. "But do not wait too long. Such beauties must be caught early."

When he went back to his quarters, my lord Marquess strolled through the quaint streets of the town slowly, and looking upon the ground as he walked. For some reason he felt vaguely depressed, and, searching within himself for a reason, recognised that the slight cloud resting upon his spirits recalled to him a feeling of his early childhood--no other than the sense of restless unhappiness he had felt years ago when he had first overheard the story of the wretched Lady of Wildairs and her neglected children.

"Yes," he said, "'tis almost the same feeling, though then I was a child, and now I am a man. When I saw the girl at the hunt, and rode home afterwards with Dunstanwolde, listening to her story, there was gloom in the air. There is that in it to make a man's spirit heavy. I must not think of her."

But Fate herself was against him. For one thing, my Lord Marlborough had brought back to him, with a few words, with strange vividness the picture of the brilliant young figure in its hunting scarlet, its gallop across the field with head held high, its flying leap over the hedge, and the gay insolence and music of its laugh.



"A child could not have made a man so remember her," he said, impatiently. "She was half woman then--half lovely, youthful devil. There is an ill savour about it all."

When he entered his rooms he found guests waiting him. A pleasure-loving young ensign, whom he had known at Oxford, and two of the lad's cronies. They were a trio of young scapegraces, delighted with any prospect of adventure, and regarding their martial duties chiefly as opportunities to shine in laced coats and cocked hats, and swagger with a warlike air and a military ogle when they passed a pretty woman in the street. It was the pretty woman these young English soldiers had come to do battle with, and hoped to take captive with flying colours and flourish of trumpets.

They were in the midst of great laughter when Roxholm entered, and young Tantillion, the ensign, sprang up to meet him in the midst of a gay roar. The lad had been one of his worshippers at the University, and loved him fondly, coming to him with all sorts of confidences, to pour forth his love difficulties, to grumble at his military duties when they interfered with his pleasures, to borrow money from him to pay his gaming debts.

"He has been with my Lord Marlborough," he cried; "I know he has by his sober countenance! We are ready to cheer thee up, Roxholm, with the jolliest story. 'Tis of the new beauty, who is but twelve years old and

has set half the world talking."

"Mistress Clorinda Wildairs of Wildairs Hall in Gloucestershire," put in Bob Langford, one of the cronies, a black-eyed lad of twenty.

"Perhaps your Lordship has heard of her, since she is so much gossiped of--Mistress Clorinda Wildairs, who has been brought up half boy by her father and his cronies, and is already the strappingest beauty in England."

"He is too great a gentleman to have heard of such an ill-mannered young hoyden," said Tantillion, "but we will tell him. 'Twas my sister Betty's letter--writ from Warwickshire--set us on," and he pulled forth a scrawled girlish-looking epistle from his pocket and spread it on the table. "Shalt hear it, Roxholm? Bet is a minx, and 'tis plain she is green with jealousy of the other girl--but 'tis the best joke I have heard for many a day."

And forthwith Roxholm must sit down and hear the letter read and listen to their comments thereupon, and their shouts of boyish laughter.

Little Lady Betty Tantillion, who was an embryo coquette of thirteen, had been to visit her relations in Warwickshire, and during her stay among them had found the chief topic of conversation a certain mad creature over the borders of Gloucestershire--a Mistress Clorinda Wildairs, who was the scandal of the county, and plainly the delight of all the tongue-waggers.

"And oh, Tom, she is a grate thing, almost as tall as a woman though she is but twelve years of age," wrote her young Ladyship, whose spelling, by the way, was by no means as correct as her sense of the proprieties. "Her father, Sir Jeoffry, allows her to ride in boys' clothes, which is indecent for a young lady even at her time of life. Brother Tom, how would you like to see your sister Betty astride a hunter, in breeches? Lady Maddon (she is the slender, graceful buty who is called the 'Willow Wand' by the gentlemen who are her servants)--she saith that this girl is a coarse thing and has so little modisty that she is proud to show her legs, thinking men will admire them, but she is mistaken, for gentlemen like a modist woman who is slight and delicate. She (Mistress Clo--as they call her) has big, bold, black eyes and holds her chin in the air and her mouth looks as red as if 'twere painted every hour. Every genteel woman speaks ill of her and is ashamed of her bold ways. And she is not even handsome, Tom, for all their talk, for I have seen her myself and think nothing of her looks. Her breeding is said to be shameful and her langwidge a disgrace to her secks. The gentlemen are always telling tales of her ways, and they laugh and make such a noise when they talk about her over their wine. At our Aunt Flixton's one day, my cousin Gill and me stood behind a tree to hear what was being said by some men who were telling stories of her (which was no wrong because we wished to learn a lesson so that we might not behave like her). Some of their words we did not understand, but some we did and 'twas of a Chaplain (they called him a fat-chopped hipercrit) who went to counsel her to behayve

more decent, and she no doubt was impudent and tried to pleas him, for he forgot his cloth and put his arms sudden about her and kist her. And the men roared shameful, for the one who told it said she knocked him down on his knees and held him there with one hand on his shoulder while she boxed his face from side to side till his nose bled in streams, and cried she (Oh, Tom!) 'Damn thy fat head,' each time she struck him 'if that is thy way to convert women, this is my way to convert men.' And he could scarce crawl away weeping, his blood and tears streeming down his face, which shows she hath not a reverence even for the cloth itself. Dere brother Thomas, if you should meet her in England when you come back from the wars, and she is a woman, I do pray you will not be like the other gentlemen and be so silly as to praise her, for such creatures should not be encorragd."

Throughout the reading of the letter uproarious shouts of laughter had burst forth at almost every sentence, and when he had finished the epistle, little Tantillion fell forward, his face on his arms on the table, his mirth almost choking him, while the others leaned back and roared. 'Twas only Roxholm who was not overcome, the story not seeming so comical to him as to the others, and yet there were points at which he himself could not help but laugh.

"'Damn thy fat head,'" shrieked Tom Tantillion, "'If that is thy way to convert women, this is mine to convert men.' Oh, Lord! I think I see the parson!"

"With his fat, slapped face and his streaming eyes and bloody nose!" shouted Langford.

"Serve him damn right!" said Tantillion, sobering and wiping his own eyes. "To put their heads into such hornets' nests would make a lot of them behave more decent." And then he picked up the letter again and made brotherly comments upon it.

"'Tis just like a minx of a girl to think a man cannot see through her spite," he said. "Bet is dying to be a woman and have the fellows ogling her. She is a pretty chit and will be the languishing kind, like the die-away Maddon who is so 'modist.' She is thin enough to be made 'modist' by it. No breeches for her, but farthingales and 'modesty pieces' high enough to graze her chin. 'Some of their words we did not understand'"--reading from the letter, and he looked at the company with a large comprehensive wink. "'Her breeding is disgraceful and her langwidge a disgrace to her secks'--Well, I'll be hanged if she isn't a girl after a man's own heart, if she's handsome enough to dress like a lad, and has the spirit to ride and leap like one--and can slap a Chaplain's face for him when he plays the impudent goat. Aren't you of my opinion, Roxholm, for all you don't laugh as loud as the rest of us? Aren't you of my mind?"

"Yes," said Roxholm, who for a few moments had been gazing at the wall with a somewhat fierce expression.

"Hello!" exclaimed Tantillion, not knowing the meaning of it. "What are you thinking of?"

Roxholm recovered himself, but his smile was rather a grim one.

"I think of the Chaplain," he said, "and how I should like to have dealt with him myself--after young Mistress Wildairs let him go."