

CHAPTER IX

Sir John Oxon Lays a Wager at Cribb's Coffee House.

This is to be no story of wars and battles, of victories and historic events, such great engines being but touched upon respectfully, as their times and results formed part of the atmosphere of the life of a gentleman of rank who moved in the world affected by them, and among such personages as were most involved in the stirring incidents of their day. That which is to be told is but the story of a man's life and the love which was the greatest power in it--the thing which brought to him the fiercest struggles, the keenest torture, and the most perfect joy.

During the next two years Gerald Mertoun saw some pretty service and much change of scene, making the "grand tour," as it were, under circumstances more exciting and of more moment to the world at large than is usually the case when a gentleman makes it. He so acquitted himself on several occasions that England heard of him and prophesied that if my Lord Marlborough's head were taken off in action there was a younger hero who might fill his place. At the news of each battle, whether it ended in victory or not, old Rowe rang the bells at Camylott, rejoicing that even if the enemy was not routed with great slaughter, my lord Marquess was still alive to fight another day. At Blenheim he so bore himself that the Duke talked long and gravely with

him in private, laying before him all the triumphs a career of arms would bring to him.

"Twenty years hence, Roxholm," he said, watching him with his keen glance as he ever did, "you might take my place, had England such questions to settle as she has to-day. In twenty years I shall be seventy-four. You were hammered from the metal nature cast me in, and you could take any man's place if 'twas your will. I could have taken any man's place I had chosen to take, by God, and so can you. If a man's brain and body are built in a certain way he can be soldier, bishop, physician, financier, statesman, King; and he will have like power in whatsoever he chooses to be, or Fate chooses that he shall be. As statesman, King, or soldier, the world will think him greatest because such things glitter in the eye and make more sound; but the strong man will be strong if Fortune makes him a huckster, and none can hide him. If Louis XV is as great a schemer as the fourteenth Louis has been, you may lead armies if you choose; but you will not choose, I think. You do not love it, Roxholm--you do not love it."

"No," answered Roxholm; "I do not love it. I can fight--any man can fight who has not white blood--and ours has been a fighting house; but mowing men down by thousands, cutting their throats, burning towns, and desolating villages filled with maddened men and shrieking women and children, does not set my blood in a flame as it does the blood of a man who is born for victorious slaughter. I loathe so the slaughter that I hate the victory. No; there are other things I can do better for

England, and be happier in doing them."

"I have known that," said the Captain-General, "even when I have seen you sweep by, followed by your men, at your most splendid moment. I have known it most when we have sate together and talked--as 'tis not my way to talk to much older men."

They had so talked together, and upon matters much more important than the world knew. His Grace of Marlborough's years had been given to other things than letters. He could win a great victory with far greater ease than he could pen the dispatch announcing it when 'twas gained. "Of all things," he once said to his Duchess, "I do not love writing." He possessed the faculty of using all men and things that came into his way, and there were times when he found of value the services of a young nobleman whose education and abilities were of the highest, and who felt deeply honoured by his unusual confidence, and was also silent and discreet both through taste and by nature. Older men were oftenest privately envious and ambitious; and a man who has desires for place and power is not to be trusted by one who has gained the highest and is attacked by jealousy on all sides. This man was rich, of high rank, and desired nothing his Grace wished to retain; besides this, his nature was large and so ruled by high honour that 'twas not in him to scheme or parley with schemers. So it befel that, despite his youth, he enjoyed the privilege of being treated as if his years had been as ripe as his intellect. He knew and learned many things. Less was hid from him than from any other man in the army, had

the truth been known. When 'twas a burning necessity for the great man to cross to England to persuade her Majesty to change her ministers, Roxholm knew the processes by which the end was reached. He had knowledge of all the feverish fits through which political England passed, in greater measure than he himself was conscious of. His reflections upon the affairs of Portugal and their management, his belief in the importance of the Emperor's reconciliation with the Protestants of Hungary, and of many a serious matter, were taken into consideration and pondered over when he knew it not. In hastening across the Channel to the English Court, in journeying to Berlin to encounter great personages, in hearing of and beholding intrigue, triumphs, disappointments, pomps, and vanities, he studied in the best possible school the art and science of statesmanship, and won for himself a place in men's minds and memories.

When, after Blenheim, he returned to England with a slight wound, his appearance at Court was regarded as an event of public interest, and commented upon with flowery rhetoric in the journals. The ladies vowed he had actually grown taller than before, that his deep eyes had a power no woman could resist, and that there was indeed no gentleman in England to compare with him either for intellect, beauty, or breeding. Her Majesty showed him a particular favour, and it was rumoured that she had remarked that, had one of her many dead infants lived and grown to such a manhood, she would have been a happy woman. Duchess Sarah melted to him as none had ever seen her melt to man before. She had heard many stories of him from her lord, and was prepared to be

gracious, but when she beheld him, she was won by another reason, for he brought back to her the day when she had been haughty, penniless Sarah Jennings, and the man who seemed to her almost godlike in his youth and beauty had knelt at her feet.

'Twas most natural that at this time there should be much speculation as to the beauty who might be chosen as his partner in life by a young nobleman of such fortune, a young hero held in such esteem by his country as well as by the world of fashion. Conversation was all the more rife upon the subject because his Lordship paid no special court to any and seemed a heart-free man.

Many suitable young ladies were indeed picked out for him, some by their own friends and families, some--who had not convenient relatives to act for them--by themselves, and each was delicately or with matter-of-fact openness presented to his notice. There were brilliant Court beauties--lovely country virgins of rank and fortune--charming female wits, and fair and bold marauders who would carry on a siege with skill and daring; but the party attacked seemed not so much obdurate as unconscious, and neither succumbed nor ran away. When the lovely Lady Helen Loftus fell into a decline and perished a victim to it at the very opening of her eighteenth year, there was a whisper among certain gossiping elderly matrons, which hinted that only after her acquaintance with the splendid young Marquess had she begun to look frail and large-eyed, and gradually fallen into decay.

"Never shall I forget," said old Lady Storms, "seeing the pretty thing look after him when he bowed and left her after they had danced a minuet together. Her look set me to watching her, and she gazed on him through every dance with her large heaven-blue eyes, and when at last she saw him turn and come towards her again her breast went up and down and her breath fluttered, and she turned from white to red and from red to white with joy. 'Tis not his fault, poor young man, that women will set their hearts on him; 'tis but nature. I should do it myself if I were not seventy-five and a hooked-nosed pock-marked creature. Upon my life, it is not quite a fair thing that a man with all things which all women must want, should be sent forth among us. Usually when a man hath good looks he hath bad manners or poor wit or mean birth, or a black soul like the new man beauty, Sir John Oxon, whom a woman must hate before she hath loved him three months. But this one--good Lord! And with the best will in life, he cannot take all of us."

The new man beauty, Sir John Oxon, was indeed much talked of at this time. Having lived a mad rake's life at the University, and there gained a reputation which had made him the fashionable leader of the wickedest youths of their time, he had fallen heir to his fortune and title just as he left Cambridge and was prepared to launch himself into town life. He had appeared in the world preceded by stories of successful intrigues, daring indeed when connected with the name of a mere youth; but as he was beautiful to behold, and had gayety and grace and a daring wit, such rumours but fixed public attention upon him and

made him the topic of the hour. He was not of the build or stateliness of Lord Roxholm, and much younger, but was as much older than his years in sin as the other was in unusual acquirement. He was a slender and exquisitely built youth, with perfect features, melting blue eyes, and rich fair hair which, being so beautiful, he disdained to conceal with any periwig, however elaborate and fashionable. When Roxholm returned to England, this male beauty's star was in the ascendant. All the town talked of him, his dress, his high play, the various intrigues he was engaged in and was not reluctant that the world of fashion should hear of. The party of young gentlemen who had been led by him at the University took him for their model in town, so that there were a set of beaux whose brocaded coats, lace steenkirks, sword-knots, and carriage were as like Sir John's as their periwigs were like his fair locks, they having been built as similar as possible by their peruquiers. His coach and four were the finest upon the road, his chair and chariot, in the town; he had fought a duel about a woman, and there were those who more than suspected that the wildest band of Mohocks who played pranks at night was formed of half a dozen pretty fellows who were known as the "Jack Oxonites."

He was not a young man whose acquirements were to be praised or emulated, but there were pretty women who flattered him and men of fashion who found pleasure in his society, for a time at least, and many a strange scandal connected itself with his name.

He sang, he told wicked stories, he gambled, and at certain

coffee-houses shone with resplendent light as a successful beau and conqueror.

'Twas at a club that Roxholm first beheld him. He had heard him spoken of but had not seen him, and going into the coffee-room one evening with a friend, a Captain Warbeck, found there a noisy party of beaux, all richly dressed, all full of wine, and all seeming to be the guests of a handsome fellow more elegantly attired and wearing a more dashing air than any of them. He was in blue and silver and had fair golden love-locks which fell in rich profusion on his shoulders.

He stood up among the company leaning against the table, taking snuff from a jewelled gold snuff-box with an insolent, laughing grace.

"A quaint jade she must be, damme," he said. "I have heard of her these three years, and she is not yet fifteen. Never were told me such stories of a young thing's beauty since I was man-born. Eyes like stars, flaming and black as jet, a carriage like a Juno, a shape--good Lord! like all the goddesses a man has heard of--and hair which is like a mantle and sweeps upon the ground. In less than a year's time I will go to Gloucestershire and bring back a lock of it--for a trophy." And he looked about him mockingly, as if in triumph.

"She will clout thee blind, Jack, as she clouted the Chaplain," cried one of the company. "No man that lives can tame her. She is the fiercest shrew in England, as she is the greatest beauty."

"She will thrash thee, Jack, as she thrashed her own father with his hunting crop when she was but five years old," another cried.

The beau in blue and silver flicked the grains of snuff lightly from the lace of his steenkirk with a white jewelled hand and smiled, slowly nodding his fair curled head.

"I know all that," he said. "Every story have I heard, and, egad! they but fire my blood. She is high mettled, but I have dealt with termagants before--and brought them down, by God!--and brought them down! There is a way to tame a woman--and I know it. Begin with a light soft hand and a melting eye--all's fair in love; and the spoils are to the victor. When I come back from Gloucestershire with my lock of raven hair"--he lifted a goblet of wine and tossed it off at a draught--"I shall leave her as such beauties should be left--on her knees." And his laugh rang forth like a chime of silver. Roxholm sprang up with a smothered oath.

"Come!" he said to Warbeck. "Come away, in God's name."

Warbeck had been his fellow-soldier abroad and knew well the dangerous spirit which hid itself beneath his calm. He had seen him roused to fury once before ('twas when in Flanders after a skirmish he found some drunken soldiers stripping a poor struggling peasant woman of her garments, while her husband shrieked curses at them from the tree where

he was tied)--and on that occasion he had told himself 'twould be safer to trifle with a mine of powder than with this man's anger. He rose hurriedly and followed him outside. In the street he could scarce keep pace with his great stride, and the curses that broke from him brought back hot days of battle.

"I would not enter into a pot-house brawl with a braggart boy," he cried. "The blackguard, dastard knave! Drag me away, Hal, lest I rush back like a fool and run him through! I have lost my wits. 'Tis the fashion for dandies to pour forth their bestial braggings, but never hath a man made my blood so boil and me so mad to strike him."

"'Tis not like thee so to lose thy wits, Roxholm," Warbeck said, his hand on his arm, "but thou hast lost them this once surely. 'Tis no work for the sword of a gentleman pinking foul-mouthed boasters in a coffee-house. Know you who he is?"

"Damnation, No!" thundered Roxholm, striding on more fiercely still.

"'Tis the new dandy, Sir John Oxon," said Warbeck. "And the beauty he makes his boast on is the Gloucestershire Wildairs handsome madcap--the one they call Mistress Clo."