

CHAPTER X

My Lord Marquess rides to Camylott.

When he went home my lord sate late over his books before he went to his chamber, yet he read but little, finding his mood disturbed by thoughts which passed through it in his despite. His blood had grown hot at the coffee-house, and though 'twas by no means the first time it had heated when he heard the heartless and coarse talk of woman which it was the habit of most men of the day to indulge in, he realised that it had never so boiled as when he listened to the brutal and significant swagger of Sir John Oxon. His youth and beauty and cruel, confident air had made it seem devilish in its suggestion of what his past almost boyish years might have held of pitiless pleasures and pitiless indifference to the consequences, which, while they were added triumphs to him, were ruin and despair to their victims.

"The laugh in his blue eye was damnable," Roxholm murmured. "'Twas as if there was no help for her or any other poor creature whom he chose to pursue. The base unfairness of it! He is equipped with the whole armament--of lures, of lies, of knowledge, and devilish skill. There are women, 'tis true, who are his equals; but those who are not--those who are ignorant and whose hearts he wins, as 'twould be easy for him to win any woman's who believed his wooing face and voice--Nay, 'twould be as dastardly as if an impregnable fortress should open all its

batteries upon a little child who played before it. And he stands laughing among his mocking crew--triumphing, boasting--in cold blood--of what he plans to do months to come. Fate grant he may not come near me often. Some day I should break his devil's neck."

He found himself striding about the room. He was burning with rage against the unfairness of it all, as he had burned when, a mere child, he pondered on the story of Wildairs. To-day he was a man, yet his passion of rebellion was curiously similar in its nature to his young fury. Now, as then, there was naught to be done to help what seemed like Fate. In a world made up of men all more or less hunters of the weak, ready to accept the theory that all things defenceless and lovely are fair game for the stronger, a man whose view was fairer was an abnormality.

"I do not belong to my time," he said, flinging himself into his chair again and speaking grimly. "I am too early--or too late--for it, and must be content to seem a fool."

"There is a Fate," he said a little later, having sat a space gazing at the floor and deep in thought--"there is a Fate which seems to link me to the fortunes of these people. My first knowledge of their wretchedness was a thing which sank deep. There are things a human being perhaps remembers his whole life through--and strangely enough they are often small incidents. I do not think there will ever pass from me my memory of the way the rain swept over the park lands and

bare trees the day I stood with my Lord Dunstanwolde at the Long Gallery window, and he told me of the new-born child dragged shrieking from beneath its dead mother's body."

Some days later he went to Camylott to pass a few weeks in the country with his parents, who were about to set forth upon a journey to Italy, where they were to visit in state a palace of a Roman noble who had been a friend of his Grace's youth, they having met and become companions when the Duke first visited Rome in making the grand tour. 'Twas a visit long promised to the Roman gentleman who had more than once been a guest of their household in England; and but for affairs of his Grace of Marlborough, which Roxholm had bound himself to keep eye on, he also would have been of the party. As matters stood, honour held him on English soil, for which reason he went to Camylott to spend the last weeks with those he loved, amid the country loveliness.

When my lord Marquess journeyed to the country he took no great cavalcade with him, but only a couple of servants to attend him, while Mr. Fox rode at his side. The English June weather was heavenly fair, and the country a bower of green, the sun shining with soft warmth and the birds singing in the hedgerows and upon the leafy boughs. To ride a fine horse over country roads, by wood and moor and sea, is a pleasant thing when a man is young and hale and full of joy in Nature's loveliness, and above all is riding to a home which seems more beautiful to him than any place on earth. One who has lived

twenty-eight years, having no desire unfulfilled, and taking his part of every pleasure that wealth, high birth, and a splendid body can give him, may well ride gaily over a good white road and have leisure to throw back his head to hearken to a skylark soaring in the high blue heavens above him, to smile at a sitting bird's bright eyes peeping timidly at him from under the thick leafage of a hazel hedge, or at the sight of a family of rabbits scurrying over the cropped woodland grass at the sound of his horse's feet, their short white tails marking their leaps as they dart from one fern shelter to the other; and to slacken his horse's pace as he rides past village greens, marking how the little children tumble and are merry there.

So my lord Marquess rode and Mr. Fox with him, for two days at least. In the dewy morning they set forth and travelled between green hedgerows and through pretty tiny villages, talking pleasantly, as old friends will talk, for to the day of his old preceptor's peaceful dying years later at Camylott, the Marquess (who was then a Duke) loved and treated him as a companion and friend, not as a poor underling Chaplain who must rise from table as if dismissed by the course of sweetmeats when it appeared. For refreshments they drew rein at noon before some roadside inn whose eager host spread before them his very best, and himself waited upon them in awful joy. When the sun set, one manservant rode on before to prepare for their entertainment for the night, and when they cantered up to the hostelry, they found the whole establishment waiting to receive and do them honour, landlord and landlady bowing and curtsying on the threshold, maidservants peeping

from behind doors and through upper windows, and loiterers from the village hanging about ready to pull forelocks or bob curtseys, as their sex demanded.

"'Tis my lord Marquess of Roxholm, the great Duke of Osmonde's heir," they would hear it whispered. "He has come back from the wars covered with wounds and now rides to pay his respects to their Graces, his parents, at Camylott Tower."

'Twas a pleasant journey; Roxholm always remembered and often spoke of it in after years, for his thought was that in setting out upon it he had begun to journey towards that which Fate, it seemed, had ordained that he should reach--though through dark nights and stormy days--at last.

'Twas on the morning of the fourth day there befel them a strange adventure, and one which had near ended in dark tragedy for one human being at least.

The horse his lordship rode was a beautiful fiery creature, and sometimes from sheer pleasure in his spirit, his master would spur him to a wild gallop in which he went like the wind's self, showing a joy in the excitement of it which was beauteous to behold. When this fourth morning they had been but about an hour upon the road, Roxholm gave to the creature's glossy neck the touch which was the signal 'twas his delight to answer.

"Watch him shoot forward like an arrow from a bow," my lord said to Mr. Fox, and the next instant was yards away.

He flew like the wind, his hoofs scarce seeming to touch the earth as he sped forward, my lord sitting like a Centaur, his face aglow with pleasure, even Mr. Fox's soberer animal taking fire somewhat and putting himself at a gallop, his rider's elderly blood quickening with his.

One side of the road they were upon was higher than the other and covered with a wood, and as Mr. Fox followed at some distance he beheld a parlous sight. At a turn in the way, down the bank, there rushed a woman, a frantic figure, hair flying, garments disordered, and with a shriek flung herself full length upon the earth before my lord Marquess's horse, as if with the intent that the iron hoofs should dash out her brains as they struck ground again. Mr. Fox broke forth into a cry of horror, but even as it left his lips he beheld a wondrous thing, indeed, though 'twas one which brought his heart into his throat. The excited beast's fore parts were jerked upward so high that he seemed to rear till he stood almost straight upon his hind legs, his fore feet beating the air; then, by some marvel of strength and skill, his body was wheeled round and his hoofs struck earth at safe distance from the prostrate woman's head.

My lord sprang from his back and stood a moment soothing his trembling,

the animal snorting and panting, the foam flying from his nostrils in his terror at a thing which his friend and master had never done to him before. The two loved each other, and in Roxholm's heart there was a sort of rage that he should have been forced to inflict upon him so harsh a shock.

The woman dragged herself half up from the white dust on which she had lain. She was shuddering convulsively, her long hair was hanging about her, her eyes wild and anguished, and her lips shivering more than trembling.

"Oh, God! Oh, God!" she wailed, and then let herself drop again and writhed, clutching at the white dust with her hands.

"Are you mad?" said Roxholm, sternly, "or only in some hysteric fury? Would you have your brains dashed out?"

She flung out her arms, tearing at the earth still and grinding her teeth.

"Yes--dashed out!" she cried; "all likeness beaten from my face that none might know it again. For that I threw myself before you."

The Marquess gave his horse to the servant, who had ridden to him, and made a sign both to him and Mr. Fox that they ride a little forward.

He bent over the girl (for she was more girl than woman, being scarce eighteen) and put his hand on her shoulder.

"Get up, Mistress," he said. "Rise and strive to calm yourself."

Suddenly his voice had taken a tone which had that in its depths no creature in pain would not understand and answer to. His keen eye had seen a thing which wrung his heart, it seeming to tell so plainly all the cruel story.

"Come, poor creature," he said, "let me help you to your feet."

He put his strong arm about her body, and lifted her as if she had been a child, and finding she was so trembling that she had not strength to support herself, he even carried her to the grass and laid her down upon it. She had a lovely gipsy face which should have been brilliant with beauty, but was wild and wan and dragged with horrid woe. Her great roe's eyes stared at him through big, welling tears of agony.

"You look like some young lord!" she cried. "You have a beautiful face and a sweet voice. Any woman would believe you if you swore a thing! What are women to do! Are you a villain, too--are you a villain, too?"

"No," answered he, looking at her straight. "No, I am not."

"All men are!" she broke forth, wildly. "They lie to us--they trick us--they swear to us--and kneel and pray--and then"--tossing up her arms with a cry that was a shriek--"they make us kneel--and laugh--laugh--and laugh at us!"

She threw herself upon the grass and rolled about, plucking at her flesh as if she had indeed gone mad.

"But for you," she sobbed, "it would be over now, and your horse's hoofs had stamped me out. And now 'tis to do again--for I will do it yet."

"Nay, you will not, Mistress," he said, in a still voice, "for your child's sake."

He thought, indeed, she would go mad then: she so writhed and beat herself, that he blamed himself for his words, and knelt by her, restraining her hands.

"'Tis for its sake I would kill myself, and have my face beaten into the bloody dust. I would kill it--kill it--kill it--more than I would kill myself!"

"Nay, you would not, poor soul," he said, "if you were not distraught."

"But I am distraught," she wailed; "and there is naught but death for

both of us."

'Twas a strange situation for a young man to find himself in, watching by the roadside the hysteric frenzy of a maddened girl; but as he had been unconscious on the day he stood, an unclad man, giving the aid that would save a life, so he thought now of naught but the agony he saw in this poor creature's awful eyes and heard in her strangled cries. It mattered naught to him that any passing would have thought themselves gazing upon a scene in a strange story.

There was a little clear stream near, and he went and brought her water, making her drink it and bathe the dust-stains from her face and hands, and the gentle authority with which he made her do these simple things seemed somehow to somewhat calm her madness. She looked up at him staring, and with long, sobbing breaths.

"Who--are you?" she asked, helplessly.

"I am the Marquess of Roxholm," he answered, "and I ride to my father's house at Camylott; but I cannot leave you until I know you are safe."

"Safe!" she said. "I safe!" and she clasped her hands about her knees as she sat, wringing her fingers together. "You do not ask me who I am," she added.

"I need not know your name to do you service," he answered. "But I must

ask you where you would go--to rest."

"To Death--from which you have plucked me!" was her reply, and she dropped her head against her held-up knees and broke forth sobbing again. "I tell you there is naught else. If your horse had beat my face into the dust, none would have known where I lay at last. Five days have I walked and my very clothes I changed with a gipsy woman. None would have known." Suddenly she looked up with shame and terror in her eyes, the blood flaming in her face. She involuntarily clutched at his sleeve as if in her horror she must confide even to this stranger.

"They had begun to look at me--and whisper," she said. "And one day a girl who hated me laughed outright as I passed--though I strove to bear myself so straightly--and I heard her mock me. 'Pride cometh first,' she said, 'and then the fall. She hath fallen far.'"

She looked so young and piteous that Roxholm felt a mist pass before his eyes.

"Poor child!" he said; "poor child!"

"I was proud," she cried. "It was my sin. They taunted me that he was a gentleman and meant me ill, and it angered me--poor fool--and I held my head higher. He told me he had writ for his Chaplain to come and wed us in secret. He called me 'my lady' and told me what his pride in me would be when we went to the town." She put her hands up to her working throat as if somewhat strangled her, and the awful look came back into

her widened eyes. "In but a little while he went away," she gasped--"and when he came back, and I went to meet him in the dark and fell weeping upon his breast, he pushed me back and looked at me, and curled his lip laughing, and turned away! Oh, John!--John Oxon!" she cried out, "God laughs at women--why shouldst not thou?" and her paroxysm began again.

At high noon a wagoner whose cart was loaded with hay drove into the rick yard of a decent farm-house some hours' journey from the turn in the road where my lord Marquess had been so strangely checked in his gallop. An elderly gentleman in Chaplain's garb and bands rode by the rough conveyance, and on a bed made in the hay a woman lay and groaned in mortal anguish.

The good woman of the house this reverend gentleman saw alone and had discourse with, paying her certain moneys for the trouble she would be put to by the charge he commanded to her, himself accompanying her when she went out to the wagon to care for its wretched burden.

Throughout the night she watched by her patient's bedside, but as day dawned she left it for a moment to call the Chaplain to come quickly, he having remained in the house that he might be at hand if need should be, in accordance with his patron's wishes.

"'Tis over, and she is dying," said the good woman. "I fear she hath

not her wits, poor soul. All night she hath cried one name, and lies and moans it still."

Mr. Fox followed her into a little cleanly, raftered chamber. He knelt by the bedside and spoke gently to the girl who lay upon the white pillows, her deathly face more white than the clean, coarse linen.

'Twas true she did not see him, but lay staring at the wall's bareness, her lips moving as she muttered the name she had shrieked and wailed at intervals throughout the hours. "John--Oh, John Oxon!" he could barely hear, "God laughs at us--why should not such as thou?"

And when the sun rose she lay stiff and dead, with a dead child in her rigid arm; and Mr. Fox rode slowly back with a grave countenance, to join his lord and patron at the village inn, and tell him all was over.