CHAPTER XII

In Which is Sold a Portrait

There are sure more forces in this Universe than Man has so far discovered, and so, not dreaming of them, can neither protect himself against, nor aid them in their workings if he would. Who has not sometimes fancied he saw their mysterious movings and--if of daring mind--been tempted to believe that in some future, even on this earth, the science of their laws might be sought for and explained? Who has not seen the time when his own life, or that of some other, seemed to flow, as a current flows, either towards or away from some end, planned or unplanned by his own mind. At one time he may plan and struggle, and, in spite of all his efforts, the current sweeps him away from the object he strives to attain--as though he were a mere feather floating upon its stream; at another, the tide bears him onward as a boat is borne by the rapids, towards a thing he had not dreamed of, nor even vaguely wished to reach. At such hours, resistance seems useless. We seize an oar, it breaks in the flood; we snatch at an overhanging bough, it snaps or slips our grasp; we utter cries for help, those on the bank pass by not hearing, or cast to us a rope the current bears out of reach. Then we cry "Fate!" and either wring our hands, or curse, or sit and gaze straight before us, while we are swept on--either over the cataract's edge and dashed to fragments, or out to the trackless ocean, to be tossed by wind and wave till some bark sees and saves

us--or we sink.

From the time of his mother's speech with him after her return from Gloucestershire, thoughts such as these passed often through Roxholm's mind. "It might have been; it might have been," she had said, and the curious leap of blood and pulse he had felt had vaguely shocked him. It scarcely seemed becoming that so young a creature as this lovely hoyden should so move a man. 'Twas the fashion that girl beauties should be women early, and at Court he had seen young things, wives and mothers when they were scarce older; but this one seemed more than half a boy and--and--! Yet he knew that he had been in earnest when he had said, "I would keep away."

"I know," he had said to himself when he had been alone later; "I know that if the creature were a woman, 'twould be best that I should keep away--'twould be best for any man to keep away from her, who was not free to bear any suffering his passion for her might bring him. The man who will be chief of a great house--whose actions affect the lives of hundreds--is not free, even to let himself be put to the torture"--and he smiled unconsciously the smile which was a little grim.

He had seen and studied many women, and in studying them had learned to know much of himself. He had not been so unconscious of them as he had seemed. Such a man must meet with adventures at any time, and at a period still tainted by the freedom of a dissolute reign, even though

'tis near twenty years past, his life, in his own despite, must contain incidents which would reveal much to the world, if related to it. Roxholm had met with such adventures, little as they were to his taste, and had found at both foreign and English Courts that all women were not non-attacking creatures, and in discovering this had learned that a man must be a stone to resist the luring of some lovely eyes.

"I need not think myself invulnerable," he had thought often. "I can resist because I have loved none of them. Had it chanced otherwise--God have mercy on my soul!"

And now the current of his life for weeks seemed strangely set towards one being. When he returned to London after seeing his parents depart for Italy, he met in his first walk in the city streets his erst fellow-collegian and officer, Lieutenant Thomas Tantillion, in England on leave, who almost hallooed with joy at sight of him, shaking him by the hand as if his arm had been a pump-handle, and then thrusting his own arm through it, and insisting affectionately on dragging him along the street that he might pour forth his renewed protestations of affection and the story of his adventures.

"Never was I more glad to see a man," he said. "I'm damned if we scapegraces have not missed thy good-looking face. Thou art a fine fellow, Roxholm--and good-natured--ay, and modest, too--for all thy beauty and learning. Many a man, with half thou hast, would wear grand Court airs to a rattle-pated rascal like Tom Tantillion. Wilford does

it--and he is but a Viscount, and for all his straight nose and fine eyes but five feet ten. Good Lord! he looks down on us who did not pass well at the University, like a cock on a dunghill."

The Marquess laughed out heartily, having in his mind a lively picture of my Lord Wilford, whose magnificence of bearing he knew well.

"Art coming back, Roxholm?" asked Tom next. "When does thy leave expire?"

"I am coming back," Roxholm answered, "but I shall not long live a soldier's life. 'Tis but part of what I wish to do."

"His Grace of Marlborough misses thee, I warrant," said Tom. "'Tis often said he never loved a human thing on earth but John Churchill and his Duchess, but I swear he warmed to thee."

"He did me honour, if 'tis true," Roxholm said, "but I am not vain enough to believe it--gracious as he has been."

At that moment his volatile companion gave his arm a clutch and stopped their walk as if a sudden thought had seized him.

"Where wert thou going, Roxholm?" he asked. "Lord, Lord, I was so glad to see thee, that I forgot."

"What didst forget, Tom?"

Tom slapt his thigh hilariously. "That I had an errand on hand. A good joke, split me, Roxholm! Come with me; I go to see the picture of a beauty, stole by the painter, who is always drunk, and with his clothes in pawn, and lives in a garret in Rag Lane."

He was in the highest spirits over the adventure, and would drag Roxholm with him, telling him the story as they went. The painter, who was plainly enough a drunken rapscallion fellow, in strolling about the country, getting his lodging and skin full of ale, now here, now there, by daubing Turks' Heads, Foxes and Hounds, and Pigs and Whistles, as signs for rustic ale-houses, had seen ride by one day a young lady of such beauty that he had made a sketch of her from memory, and finding where she lived, had hung about in the park to get a glimpse of her again, and having succeeded, had made her portrait and brought it back to town, in the hope that some gentleman might be taken by its charms and buy it.

"He hath drunk himself down to his last groat, and will let it go for a song now," said Tom. "I would get there before any other fellow does. Jack Wyse and Hal Langton both want it, but they have gamed their pockets empty, and wait till necessity forces him to lower his price to their means. But an hour since I heard that he had pawned his breeches and lay in bed writing begging letters. So now is the time to visit him. It was in Gloucestershire he found her--"

He stopped and turned round.

"Hang me! 'Tis the very one Bet wrote of, and I read you the letter. Dost remember it? The vixen who clouted the Chaplain for kissing her."

"Yes," said Roxholm; "I remember."

Tom rattled on in monstrous spirits. "I have had further letters from Bet," he said, "and each is a sermon with the beauty's sins for a text. The women are so jealous of her that the men could not forget her if they would, they scold so everlastingly. Lord, what a stir the hoyden is making!"

They turned into Rag Lane presently, and 'twas dingy enough, being a dirty, narrow place, with high black houses on either side, their windows broken and stuffed with bits of rag and paper, their doorways ornamented with slatternly women or sodden-faced men, while up and down ran squalid, noisy children under the flapping pieces of poor wearing apparel hung on lines to dry.

After some questioning they found the house the man they were in search of lived in, and 'twas a shade dingier than the rest. They mounted a black broken-down stairway till they reached the garret, and there knocked at the door.

For a few moments there was no answer, but that they could hear loud and steady snores within.

"He is sleeping it off!" said Tom, grinning, and whacked loudly on the door's cracked panels, by which, after two or three attacks, he evidently disturbed the sleeper, who was heard first to snort and then to begin to grumble forth drowsy profanities.

"Let us in," cried Tom. "I bring you a patron, sleepy fool."

Then 'twas plain some one tumbled from his bed and shuffled forward to the door, whose handle he had some difficulty in turning. But when he got the door open, and caught sight of lace and velvet, plumed hats and shining swords, he was not so drunk but that which the sight suggested enlivened and awaked him. He uttered an exclamation, threw the door wide, and stood making unsteady but humbly propitiatory bows.

"Your lordships' pardon," he said. "I was asleep and knew not that such honour awaited me. Enter, your lordships; I pray you enter."

'Twas a little mean place with no furnishings but a broken bedstead, a rickety chair, and an uncleanly old table on which were huddled together a dry loaf, an empty bottle, and some poor daubs of pictures. The painter himself was an elderly man with a blotched face, a bibulous eye, and half unclothed, he having wrapped a dirty blanket about his body to conceal decently his lack of nether garments.

"We come to look at your portrait of the Gloucestershire beauty," said Tom.

"All want to look at it, my Lord," said the man, with a leer, half servile, half cunning. "There came two young gentlemen of fashion yesterday morning, and almost lost their wits at sight of it. Either would have bought it, but both had had ill luck at basset for a week and so could do no more than look, and go forth with their mouths watering."

Tom grinned.

"You painters are all rogues who would bleed every gentleman you see," he said.

"We are poor fellows who find it hard to sell our wares," the artist answered. "'Tis only such as the great Mr. Kneller who do not starve, and lie abed because their shirts and breeches are in pawn. When a man has a picture like to take the fancy of every young nobleman in town, he may well ask its value."

"Let us see it," cried Tom. "To a gentleman it may seem a daub."

The man looked at him slyly.

"'Twould pay me to keep it hid here and exhibit it for a fee," he said. "The gentlemen who were here yesterday will tell others, and they will come and ask to look at it, and then--"

"Show it to us, sir," said Roxholm, breaking in suddenly in his deeper voice and taking a step forward.

He had stood somewhat behind, not being at first in the mood to take part in the conversation, having no liking for the situation. That a young lady's portrait should be stolen from her, so to speak, and put on sale by a drunken painter without her knowledge, annoyed him--and the man's leering hint of its future exhibition roused his blood.

"Show it to us, sir," he said, and in his voice there was that suggestion of command which is often in the voice of a man who has had soldiers under him.

The but half-sober limner being addressed by him for the first time, and for the first time looking at him directly, gave way to a slight hiccoughing start and strove to stand more steady. 'Twas no gay youthful rake who stood before him, but plainly a great gentleman, and most amazing tall and stately. 'Twas not a boy come to look at a peep-show, but might be a possible patron.

"Yes, your lordship," he stammered, bowing shakily, "I--I will bring it forth. Your lordship will find the young lady a wonder." He went

swaying across the room, and opened a cupboard in the wall. The canvas stood propped up within, and he took it out and brought it back to them--keeping its face turned away.

"Let me set it in as good a light as the poor place can give," he said, and dragged forth the rickety-legged chair that he might prop it against its back, for the moment looking less drunk and less a vagabond in his eagerness to do his work justice; there lurking somewhere, perhaps, in his besotted being, that love which the artist soul feels for the labour of its dreams.

"In sooth, my lord, 'tis a thing which should have been better done," he said. "I could have done the young lady's loveliness more justice, had I but had the time. First I saw her for scarce more than a moment, and her face so haunted me that I sketched it for my own pleasure--and then I hung about her father's park for days, until by great fortune I came upon her one morning standing under a tree, her dogs at her feet, and she lost in thought--and with such eyes gazing before her--! I stood behind a tree and did my best, trembling lest she should turn. But no man could paint her eyes, my lord," rubbing his head ruefully; "no man could paint them. Mr. Kneller will not--when she weds a Duke and comes to queen it at the Court."

He had managed to keep before the picture as he spoke, and now he stepped aside and let them behold it, glancing from one to the other.

"Damn!" cried Tom Tantillion, and sprang forward from his chair at sight of it.

My lord Marquess made no exclamation nor spoke one word. The painter marked how tall he stood as he remained stationary, gazing. He had folded his arms across his big chest and seemed to have unconsciously drawn himself to his full height. Presently he spoke to the artist, though without withdrawing his eyes from the picture.

"'Tis no daub," he said. "For a thing done hastily 'tis done well. You have given it spirit."

'Twas fairly said. Indeed, the poor fellow knew something of his trade, 'twas evident, and perhaps for once he had been sober, and inspired by the fire of what he saw before him.

She stood straight with her back against a tree's trunk, her hands behind her, her eyes gazing before. She was tall and strong as young Diana; under the shadow of her Cavalier hat, her rich-tinted face was in splendid gloom, it seeming gloom, not only because her hair was like night, and her long and wide eyes black, but because in her far-off look there was gloom's self and somewhat like a hopeless rebellious yearning. She seemed a storm embodied in the form of woman, and yet in her black eyes' depths--as if hid behind their darkest shadows and unknown of by her very self--there lay the possibility of a great and strange melting--a melting which was all woman--and woman who was

queen.

"By the Lord!" cried Tom Tantillion again, and then flushed up boyishly and broke forth into an awkward laugh. "She is too magnificent a beauty for an empty-pocketed rascal like me to offer to buy her. I have not what would pay for her--and she knows it. She sets her own price upon herself, as she stands there curling her vermilion lip and daring a man to presume to buy her cheap. 'Tis only a great Duke's son who may make bold to bid." And he turned and bowed, half laughing, half malicious, to Roxholm. "You, my lord Marquess; a purse as full as yours need not bargain for the thing it would have, but clap down guineas for it."

"A great Duke's son!" "My lord Marquess!" The owner of the picture began to prick up his ears. Yes, the truth was what he had thought it.

"The gentleman who owns this picture when the young lady comes up to town that the world may behold her," he said, "will be a proud man."

"No gentleman would have the right to keep it if he had not her permission," said Roxholm--and he said it without lightness.

"Most gentlemen would keep it whether she would or no," answered the painter.

"Catch Langdon or Wyse giving it up," says Tom. "And Wyse said, that blackguard Oxon was coming to see it because he hath made a bet on her

in open club, and hearing of the picture, said he would come to see if she were worth his trouble--and buy her to hang in his chambers, if she were--that he might tell her of it when he went to Gloucestershire to lay siege to her. He brags he will persuade her he has prayed to her image for a year."

"What is your price?" said my Lord Roxholm to the painter.

The man set one and 'twas high though 'twould not have seemed so in an age when art was patronised and well paid for in a country where 'twas more generously encouraged than in England in the days of good Queen Anne. In truth, the poor fellow did not expect to get half he asked, but hoped by beginning well to obtain from a Duke's son twice what another gentleman would give him--and he was prepared to haggle, if need be, for two hours.

But my lord Marquess did not haggle. There had come into his countenance the look of a man who has made up his mind to take the thing he wants. He drew forth his purse and paid down the sum in golden guineas and bank-notes, the painter's eyes gloating as they were counted on the table and his head growing giddy with his joy. He would have enough to live drunk for a year, after his own economical methods. A garret--and drink enough--were all he required for bliss. The picture was to be sent forthwith to Osmonde House, and these directions given, the two gentlemen turned to go. But at the door the Marquess paused and spoke again.

"If any should come here before it is sent to me," he said, "remember that 'tis already purchased and not on exhibition."

The artist bowed low a dozen times.

"On my sacred honour, your lordship," he replied, "none shall see it."

Roxholm regarded him for a moment as if a new thought had presented itself to his mind.

"And remember also," he added, "if any should ask you to try to paint a copy from memory--or to lie in wait for the young lady again and make another--'tis better"--and his voice had in it both meaning and command--"'tis far better to please a patron, than a purchaser who has a momentary caprice. Live soberly and do honest work--and bring to me what is worthy of inspection. You need not starve unless 'tis your wish."

"My lord Marquess," cried the man; "your noble lordship," and he made as if he would fall upon his knees.

Roxholm made a gesture towards the picture, still in its place upon the crazy chair.

"I told you that was no daub," he said. "A man who can do that much can

do more if he has the spirit."

And his visitors went out and left the artist in his garret, the stormy handsome creature gazing into space on one side, the guineas and bank-notes on the dusty table; and after having reflected upon both for a little space, he thrust his head out of the door and called for his landlady, who having beheld two richly clad gentlemen come from the attic, was inclined to feel it safe to be civil, and answering his summons went up to him, and being called in, was paid her long unpaid dues from the little heap on the table, the seeing of which riches almost blinded her and sent her off willingly to the pawnbroker's to bring back the pledged breeches and coat and linen.

"The tall gentleman with so superb an air," the poor man said, proudly, trembling with triumphant joy, "is my lord Marquess of Roxholm, and he is the heir of the ducal house of Osmonde, and promises me patronage."

When they passed out into the street and were on their way to St. James's Park, Tom Tantillion was in a state of much interested excitement.

"What shall you do with it, Roxholm?" he asked. "Have it set in a rich gold frame and hung up on the gallery at Osmonde House--or in the country? Good Lord! I dare not have carried her to my lodgings if I could have bought her. She would be too high company for me and keep me

on my best manners too steady. A man dare not play the fool with such a creature staring at him from the wall. 'Tis only a man who is a hero, and a stately mannered one, who could stay in the same room with her without being put out of countenance. Will she rule in the gallery in town or in the country?"

"She will not be framed or hung, but laid away," answered Roxholm. "I bought her that no ill-mannered rake or braggart should get her and be insolent to her in her own despite when she could not strike him to his knees and box his ears, as she did the Chaplain's--being only a woman painted on canvas." And he showed his white, strong teeth a little in a strange smile.

"What!" cried Tom. "You did not buy her for your own pleasure----?"

The Marquess stopped with a sudden movement.

"On my faith!" he exclaimed, "there is the Earl of Dunstanwolde. He sees us and comes towards us."