

Chapter II

Doggett's coat and Badge

IN the ten years that had elapsed after her great-grandfather's death Betty Pole had many subjects for after-remembrance. Queen Anne had passed away; Marlborough had won glorious victories, had been a traitor twice told and had fallen; the royal vultures had gathered round the deathbed of the Queen, and the hopes of the Stuarts had been for ever shattered. King George had come, and ruled in London a German Court by German ways. In Betty's own family, too, there had been many changes. Her father had been dead more than six years, and his sister who had come to take his place still waged a pretty even battle with Abigail. The latter had grown fatter and greyer, but her heart was as stout as of old and her tongue as sharp. Many a hard knock Miss Priscilla had had to take in the way of words; but she was a just, shrewd woman and knew Abigail's worth and fidelity too well to quarrel with her for a show of temper. She never failed, however, to have her revenge, and in time Abigail came to know that she had met more than her match in the patient, well-tempered woman who bided her time and gave a home-thrust when that time came.

The elder children had all gone their own ways. One of the boys had become a midshipman and was away with the Southern fleet, and the other had just been gazetted a cornet in the Green Horse Dragoons. Marjory, the pert, had married a Scotch Writer to the Signet and was at present engaged in nursing her first baby in Edinburgh, whilst her elder sister, Lucy, lay beside her baby and her husband too in the deep sea beyond the Dogger Bank where the *Queen of Sheba* went down with all hands.

Betty was now an heiress to a considerable fortune, for during her long minority the money and estate which her great-grandfather had left her had been used to great advantage by her trustees. Every year the account in Mr. Child's bank grew larger. Even the nation wanted money badly at times, and the most active trustee, the shrewd merchant, Mr. Fenton, of Finsbury Square—Betty's cousin on her father's side—who advised the dealings with her money, knew well how to open his hand and when to close it; and each year's end found that his judgment in such matters was always right. He was a somewhat hard, stern man, this Mr. Fenton, now a London alderman, and to some he seemed of an icy temperament; but in his own way he loved his gentle, high-bred cousin, and was proud of her. He would often confide to his cronies that some day she should have such a fortune as would show the world what a London merchant could gather in the span of one life. His sister, who lived with him, shared his love for Betty, who well knew that there was always a loving welcome for her from the stern old pair in the City.

There was only one point on which the old merchant was unsatisfied, and that was the sum of one thousand guineas which, by Mr. Stanmore's will, lay in the hands of Mr. Child to be paid only to Miss Betty Pole on her own order, when and how she would—all wishes even of her trustees to the contrary notwithstanding. Once he spoke to her about it and she listened in silence whilst he spoke—

“It is a shame, lass, I tell ye; simply a shame to let a sum like that lie idle. I could turn it over and over again in a year and make each guinea into ten. Why, what with their fancy stocks, their South Sea schemes, and their East India Companies and the like, these fools run mad in the hunt for the shadow of wealth; and men who know what money and business mean look on and keep their heads cool till the time comes. I could use this sum alone in such a way that if ye had naught else in the world it would let ye hold up your head with Miss Mendez herself. What with this and your youth and beauty you might pick a husband from the heirs of the Russells and the Montagus! Be wise, child, and let me deal with that as I have dealt with the rest!” Then Betty answered very quietly, as she took his hand and held it, as she used to hold her grandfather's—it was a pretty trick she had and it seemed to become her well—

“Thank you, indeed, dear Cousin Fenton, for all you have done for me. Aunt Priscilla often tells me how good you have been to me, and how well you have dealt with my fortune, and I am not ungrateful. Indeed, indeed I am not! But my grandfather spoke to me of that money the very last time I saw him—the very night he died—when he told me of his mother who had seen the Armada, and of his wife who had cried at King Charles's death, and of his daughter who had been through the Great Plague and the Great Fire, and of her daughter, my mother, who had seen King William enter London. And he gave me a trust that I must keep!”

Here Mr. Fenton struck in—

“Oh, if there is any secret——” Betty still held his hand in one of hers whilst she laid the other on his lips.

“No secret indeed, cousin—now do not be angry with me—I am sure that if you knew all you would be the first to tell me that I am right.”

The old gentleman yielded at once to her soft influence and stroked her hand, as he answered—

“There, there, my dear, I won't say another word—not one! Do as you please, and if you see any duty, do it. But for the life of me I can't see what duty there is in not multiplying one by ten.”

Just then his sister, Cousin Hester, came in, and other matters were spoken of. That night it was arranged that Cousin Hester was to come and stay for a few days in Chelsea at the old house in Cheyne Walk so as to see the great race amongst the watermen for the orange-coloured coat and silver badge given by Mr. Doggett, the comedian. This race was expected to be a very fine affair; it was to be held on the 1st of August, in memory of the crowning of King George the year before, and a great company were expected to be on the river that day. The race was to be amongst six young watermen, who were to start from the “Old Swan,” near London Bridge, at the ebb of the tide and row up the river as far as the White Swan Inn at Chelsea. All the Livery of the watermen

were to be there, all the great City companies were to send their State barges, and many noblemen and gentlemen of quality arranged that their barges and wherries would be out that day. As the barges were sumptuous affairs, gay with bright colours and gold, with canopies of rich stuffs; and as oarsmen and other servants were glorious with the richest liveries, the sight was expected to be a fine one indeed.

When the day came there was more splendour even than had been expected, for the ministers were wary, and they thought it possible that so great a concourse might afford an opportunity to the enemies of the House of Hanover to make manifest their disfavour. As the German succession was too recent to allow of any such chance being ignored, it was thought advisable to have a great display of the forces of the Crown—albeit in a purely pacific manner and simply as an addition to the pageant. And so each warship at the Nore and Tilbury and in the docks and at the wharves of London sent some of her boats to the show. Dapper and business-like they all seemed as, in perfect time with flashing oar-blades and steersmen bending double at each stroke, they swept in and out amongst the floating mass. They were everywhere along the whole course, not seeming of set purpose; but from the Tower to Chelsea there was no stretch of water without its navy boat full of alert, swarthy, pig-tailed fellows, cutlass on side and pistol in belt ready for any emergency.

And then again there was another addition, more showy if less effective at a pinch. All the boats of the King's household were out. Indeed, there seemed to have been here some attempt to make as brave a show as possible; for even all those boats whose antique shapes and time-worn timbers seemed to have entitled them to rot away in peace, had been furbished up and sent out, gay with paint and gold, to add to the splendour of the scene. These royal boats, each carrying the Standard, made a numerous muster, and the scarlet of the royal livery with the great badges of the King's watermen almost as large as breastplate and back-piece, caught the eyes of the multitude.

In each of the royal boats sat some gentleman to represent his King. In some of the great barges were high officers of State, each with a party of ladies and gentlemen, all radiant with rich clothing. Especially noticeable were all those in any way connected with ceremonial or pleasure, the Lord Chamberlain, the Master of the Horse, the Master of the Hounds, the Master of the Hawks. In others were less important personages, and even in the wherries and smaller pleasure boats were some young gentlemen of family or degree, as an overt sign of the magnitude and importance of the Court party. In the great barge of the Company of Drysalters, Alderman Fenton, as was right, had a place. Betty had the boat of four oars which her brothers had used to delight in, made brave for the occasion, and she, with Aunt Priscilla and Cousin Hester, sat on blue cushions in the stern, whilst Mrs. Abigail had a seat all to herself in the bow and looked after the baskets with the dinner, which was to be taken on the water to-day. Everything was astir on the river hours before the race, and all sorts of trials of strength and speed were undertaken, and all sorts of mishaps occurred. The river ran strongly in the reaches between Vauxhall and Battersea, and in such a throng there were many novices. But help was always at hand, and the sun was bright and warm; men and women and girls and boys were on pleasure bent, and all were gay and happy.

Betty's boat took several turns down the river as far as Vauxhall Gardens, and the eyes of its occupants enjoyed to the full the life and rich beauty of the scene.

Several times they were passed, either going up or down the river, by one of the royal boats, which seemed gifted with a divine uneasiness. It was powerfully manned by four splendid oarsmen, whose bronzed faces, tattooed skin, and precision of stroke, showed them to be men-of-war'smen who had donned the royal livery for the occasion—a state of things noticeable to the eye of a keen observer in many of the royal boats. They never seemed to tire, but swept up and down as though to show off their strength. There was only one other person in the boat, a young gentleman who steered. He was a handsome young fellow

with black hair and dark eyes and a proud bearing, and he carried well the elegant dress which he wore. It did not seem to strike either of the elder ladies that there was a method in the constant passing and repassing of their boat; but Betty seemed to realise it in some way, for she never raised her eyes as the boat swept by—that is, she never raised her eyelids, but looked out between her long eyelashes, as even the fairest and sweetest young women do when a strange young man of elegant appearance is in the immediate foreground.

As for Mrs. Abigail, communing with herself in the solitude amongst the pasties and chickens and bottles, her mind was quite made up. Here at last was the true Prince Charming, whose heart the young mistress whom she idolised was to win. His bright, handsome face, his resolute bearing, his stature and form—for he looked lithe as a panther and strong as steel—his royal surroundings, and the manifest admiration of his glances at Miss Betty as he ran his barge instinctively as close as he safely could, all satisfied the faithful old woman's requirements, and the time seemed impossibly and exasperatingly long until he should formally declare himself. After all is told, what is so enduring, so strong, or so complete as an old servant's protectorship over the future of the child she has reared? Abigail got more and more impatient as the time went on. The day was hot, for the August sun was blazing, and she took off her hat to fan herself. This hat was a treasure, something that Abigail valued as the apple of her eye. Betty called out to her—

“Take care of your hat, Abigail; if you let it drop you know the current will carry it under some of the boats.”

They were at this time up close to the “Swan,” where a great assemblage was gathering to watch the close of the race, which was now going on. Down the river was heard a roaring which was taken up as the boats passed along. A way was kept clear in the centre of the stream, and to insure this the boats drew right and left. This occasioned some confusion, especially on the left bank, where the current, glancing off the projecting promenade in front of the King's house, drove the boats together.

Betty's oarsmen, who knew the river, kept the boat in her place by judiciously modulated strokes; but some of the other boats were not so well handled, and one of them came swiftly down the current towards the mass of craft.

Some of the men in the other boats called out 4

—especially the gallant-looking young gentleman in the royal barge, who had taken up his position a little down the stream and out towards the centre, from whence he could see Betty.

Abigail, intent on watching the young gentleman, did not see the coming boat, and when the collision came, though it was not much in itself, it so upset her that she dropped her precious hat to catch the gunwale of the boat, and the current in an instant swept it away. Betty saw it coming by and tried to catch it. It was just beyond her reach, and so, with hand on the gunwale, she leaned over as far as she could and just succeeded in grasping it. But at that instant the colliding boat, fended off at first by the hands of its occupants, again struck Betty's boat. The shock, slight as it was in itself, was much to her in her position of poise, and threw her into the water. There was an instant shout, and then Priscilla and Hester clutched wildly at where Betty's head had been, and many a voice was raised and many a hand stretched out.

But quickest of all the throng was the young gentleman in the royal boat! Hardly had Betty sunk under the water when he had leaped to his feet and dived after her. He was a strong swimmer and caught her as she rose, and with a few powerful strokes of his right arm took her with the stream, whilst his own men bent to their oars and followed him.

But it is no light task to swim amongst a press of boats in a current, and especially when one has to support two and with only one hand available for the purpose. One or two boats in such a case can be helpful, but a mass of them makes new danger, Oars get entangled, those who should sit quiet stand up, and those who can help are hampered; boats which to be useful should be held still and on an even keel, are rocked to and fro till they themselves become a positive source of danger. So it was on this occasion. The mere multitude of rescuers and their variety of plans, made a small danger into a great one.

So skilful and strong a swimmer as this man evidently was, could have easily held her up till help came; but with the current, the swaying boats, and the closer ingathering mass there was an added danger of being crushed. He took in the situation at a glance, and with a boldness and readiness which commended itself to every man present who could swim, he dived beneath the boats, taking with him Betty, who had not uttered a sound and who now yielded herself quietly to his guidance. His oarsmen, who, seeing the danger and recognising his course of action, had skirted round the press of boats and were waiting at the other side when he came up, immediately seized him. He gasped out to them: "Take the lady!" and instantly four strong hands raised her and lifted her into the barge whilst he himself clung to the gunwale, panting.

Instantly all those around began to cheer in true British fashion; even those in the mass of boats up and down and across the stream who had not seen what had happened but knew from the struggling and the pressing together of the boats and by the cheers that something unusual had taken place, took up the shout till down the stream the waiting crowd seemed to be in doubt as to which way the race was coming. Priscilla and Hester, both pale as death, held one another's hands tight, and Abigail, with no one to hold on to except the oarsman, clasped her own hands and said her prayers, as a good woman should do in time of danger—and at other times. Close to Betty's boat there was