The Yeoman Adventurer

George W. Gough

Table of Contents

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To
A. D. Steel−Maitland, M.P.
In Gratitude and Admiration

CHAPTER I. THE GREAT JACK

Our Kate, Joe Braggs, and I all had a hand in the beginning, and as great results grew in the end out of the small events of that December morning, I will set them down in order.

It began by my refusing point−blank to take Kate to the vicar's to watch the soldiers march by. I loved the vicar, the grave, sweet, childless old man who had been a second father to me since the sad day which made my mother a widow, and but for the soldiers nothing would have been more agreeable than to spend the afternoon with the old man and his books. But my heart would surely have broken had I gone. A caged linnet is a sorry enough sight in a withdrawing−room, but hang the cage on a tree in a sunlit garden, with free birds twittering and flitting about it, and you turn dull pain into shattering agony. The vicar's little study, with the rows of books he had made me know and love with some small measure of his own learning and passion, was the perch and seed−bowl of my cage, the things in it, after my sweet mother and saucy Kate, that made life possible, but still part of the cage, and it would have maddened me to hop and twitter there in sight of free men with arms in their hands and careers in front of them. Jack Dobson would march by, the sweetness of life for Kate—little dreamed she that I knew it—but for me the bitterness of death. Jack Dobson! I liked Jack, but not clinquant in crimson and gold, with spurs and sword clanking on the hard, frost−bitten road. I laughed at the idea; Jack Dobson, whom I had fought time and time again at school until I could lick him as easily as I could look at him; Jack Dobson, a jolly enough lad, who fought cheerily even when he knew a sound thrashing was in store for him, but all his brains were good for was to stumble through *Arma virumque cano*, and then whisper, “Noll, you can fire a gun and shoot a man, but how can you sing 'em?” And because his thin, shadowy, grasping father was a man of much outward substance and burgess for the ancient borough, Jack was cornet in my Lord Brocton's newly raised regiment of dragoons, this day marching with other of the Duke of Cumberland's troops from Lichfield to Stafford. And for me, the pride of old Bloggs for Latin and of all the lads for fighting, the most stirring deed of arms available was shooting rabbits. So, consuming inwardly with thoughts of my hard fate, I refused to go to the vicar's. Mother should go. For her it would be a real treat, and Kate would be the better under her quiet, seeing eyes.

“Well then,” said Kate, “grump at home over your beastly Virgil.” Mother, who understood as only mothers can, said nothing, and prepared my favourite dishes for dinner.

The meal over, and the house−place 'tidied,' which seldom meant more than the harassing of a few stray specks of dust, Kate in her best fripperies and mother in her churchgoing gown started for the vicar's. I stood in the porch and watched them across the cobbled yard and along the road till they dropped out of sight beyond the bridge.

Then Kate's share of these introductory events became manifest. Search high, search low, there was no sign of my dear, dumpy Virgil, in yellowing parchment with red edges. I found Kate's cookery−book, and would have flung it through the window, but my eye caught the quaint inscription on the fly−leaf, in her big, pot−hooky handwriting:

“KATHERINE WHEATMAN, her book,
God give her grease to larn to cook.
At the Hanyards.
Jul. 1739.”

The simple words stung me like angry hornets. Our red−headed Kate was no scholar, but at any rate her reading was more useful in our little world than mine; for this was where she learned the artistry of the dainties and devices Jack Dobson and I were so fond of. And if I did not soon learn to do something well, even were it only how to farm my five hundred acres to a profit, Kate's cooking would really require the miraculous aid suggested in her unintentional and, to me, biting epigram. I put the book down, and gave over the hunt for my Virgil. It would probably be useless in any case, since Kate had a cunning all her own, and had surely bestowed it far beyond any searching of mine. I contented myself with a fair reprisal, stowing a stray ribbon of hers in my breeches' pocket, and sat down to smoke. My pipe would not draw, and I smashed it in trying to make it.

The tall oak clock tick−tocked on in the house−place, and Jane sang on at her churning in the dairy across the

yard. I sat gazing at the fire, where I could see nothing but Jack Dobson in his martial grandeur, and I hated him for his greatness, and despised myself for my pettiness. All the same it was unendurable, and it was a relief to see Joe Braggs tiptoeing carefully across the yard dairywards. The rascal should have been patching a gap in the hedge of Ten−acres, and here he was, foraging for a jug of ale. He could wheedle Jane as easily as he could snare a rabbit, but I would scarify him out of his five senses, the hulk.

The singing stopped, and then the churning, and five minutes later I crept up to the kitchen door, which was ajar. There was my lord Joe, a jug of ale in hand, his free arm round Jane's neck. How endurable these two found life at the Hanyards! I caught a fragment of their gossip.

"Be there such things as rale quanes, Jin?"

"Of course," she replied. "There's pictures of 'em in one of Master Noll's books. Crowns on their yeds, too."

"There's one on 'em down 'tour house, Jin, but she ain't got no crown. But bless thee, wench, I'd sooner kiss thee than look at fifty quanes."

Jane yelped as I murdered an incipient kiss by knocking the jug out of his hand across the kitchen, but in kicking him out of doors I tripped over a bucket of water, and about half a score fine dace flopped miserably on the wet floor.

"Dunna carry on a' that'n, Master Noll," said Joe. "I only com' up t'ouse to bring you them daceys."

"And what the devil do I want with them?" said I angrily.

Joe knew me. He said, "There's a jack as big as a gate−post in that 'ole between the reeds along th' 'igh bonk."

He saw the cock of my eye, and went on: "I saw 'im this mornin', an' 'eard 'im. 'E made a splosh like a sack o' taters droppin' off the bridge. So I just copped 'e a few daceys, thinkin' as you'd be sure to go after 'im."

"Put them in some fresh water, Joe, and you, Jane, fill him another jug. I'll own up to Mistress Kate for smashing the other."

I fetched my rod and tackle, picked up the bucket of dace, and set off across the fields to the river. The bank nearer the house, and about three hundred yards from it, stood from two to six feet above the water, being lowest where a brick bridge carried the road to the village. The opposite bank was very low, and was fringed in summer with great masses of reeds and bulrushes, now withered down nearly to nothing, but still showing the pocket of deep water where the jack had "sploshed like a sack o' taters." It was opposite the highest part of our bank—the Hanyards was bounded by the river in this direction—and the bridge was about one hundred yards down−stream to my left. In a few minutes a fine dace was swimming in the gap as merrily as the tackle would let him.

For an hour or more I took short turns up and down the bank, just far enough from the edge to keep my cork in view. If the jack was there, he made no sign, and at length my sportsman's eagerness began to flag, and my eye roamed across the meadows to the church spire, under the shadow of which life as I could never know it was lilting merrily northwards. Here I was and here I should remain, like a cabbage, till Death pulled me up by the roots.

Worthy Master Walton says that angling is the contemplative man's recreation, and, having had in these later years much to con over in my mind, I know that he is right. But it is no occupation for a fuming man, and as I marched up and down I forgot all about my cork, till, with a short laugh that had the tail of a curse in it, I noted that a real gaff was a silly weapon with which to cut down an imaginary Highlander, and turned again to my angling.

And at that very moment a thing happened the like of which I had never seen before, and have not since seen in another ten years of fishing. My rod was jerked clean off the bank, and careered away down−stream so fast that I had to run hard to get level with it. Here was work indeed, and at that joyous moment I would not have changed places with Jack Dobson. Without ado, I jumped into the river, waded out, recovered the butt of my rod, and struck.

"As big as a gate−post." Joe was right. As I struck, the jack came to the surface. The great stretch of yellow belly and the monstrous length of vicious snout made my heart leap for joy. I would rather land him than command a regiment. My rod bent to a sickle as I fought him, giving him line and pulling in, again, again, and again. A dozen times I saw the black bars on his shimmering back as he came at me, evil in his red−rimmed eyes and danger in his cruel teeth, but the stout tackle stood it out. Sweat poured off my forehead though I was up to the waist in ice−cold water. Inch by inch I fought my way to the bank, and then fought on again to get close to the bridge, where I could scramble out.

Probably I was half an hour in getting him there, but at last, by giving him suddenly a dozen yards of loose line to go at, I was able to climb on to the bank and check him before he got across to the stumps of the reeds. But here I met with disaster, for in climbing up I jerked the hook of my gaff out of my collar, where I had put it for safety, and it fell into the stream.

“Stick to the fish,” said some one behind me, “and leave the hook to me.”

“Thanks,” said I briefly, for I was scant of breath, and continued the struggle.

A woman knelt on the bank, pulled the gaff in with a riding whip, plunged down a shapely hand and recovered it. Then she stood behind me, watching the fight. The jack, big and strong as he was, began to tire, and soon I had him making short, sharp spurts in the shallow water at our feet.

My new ally stood quietly on the bank, holding the gaff ready for the right moment. It came: a deft movement, a good pull together, and the great jack curled and bounced on the bank.

“Over thirty pounds if he's an ounce!” I cried gleefully.

“Well done, fisherman!” she said. “It was a splendid sight. I've watched you all along. When you jumped into the river, I thought you were going to drown yourself. You had been walking up and down in a most desperate and dejected fashion.”

The raillery gave me courage to look into her eyes. I wondered if they were black, but decided that they were not, since her hair was the colour of wheat when it is ripening for the sickle and the summer sun falls on it at eve. And I, who am six feet in my socks, had hardly to lower my eyes to look into hers. Her face was beautiful beyond all imagining of mine. I had conjured up visions of Dido enthralled of Aeneas, of Cleopatra bending Antony to her whim. But the conscious art of my day−dreams had wrought no such marvel as here I saw in very flesh before me. I felt as one who drinks deep of some rich and rare vintage, and wonders why the gods have blessed him so. And further, as small things jostle big things in the mind, I knew that this was the real queen that had dazzled Joe Braggs.

“What do you call it?” she said, looking down at the fish.

“A jack, or pike, madam.”

“'The tyrant of the watery plains,' as Mr. Pope calls him. You've heard of Mr. Pope, the poet?” She spoke as if 'No' was the inevitable answer.

“Strictly speaking, no, madam,” said I gravely, “but I have read his so−called poems.” She frowned. “Horace calls the jack,” I continued, “ *lupus*, the wolf−fish, as one may say, and a very good name too. Doubtless madam has heard of Horace.”

My quip brought a glint into her eyes and a richer colour to her cheek. “Yes, heard of him,” she said, with a trace of chagrin in her voice. “And now, O Nimrod of the watery plains, how far is it to the village smithy?”

“Just under a mile, madam.”

“And how long does it take to shoe a horse?”

“How many shoes, madam?”

Again the glint in her eyes, and this time I saw some of the blue in them. “One, sir,” she said shortly.

“Ten to fifteen minutes, madam.”

“He's a very long time,” she said under her breath.

“The smith is probably very busy to−day.”

“Busy! Why so?”

“The dragoons may have found him much work,” said I, merely my way of explaining the delay. But the words stabbed her. She laid a hand on my arm and cried gaspingly, “Dragoons! What do you mean? Quick!”

“The Duke of Cumberland is marching north from Lichfield against the Stuart, and Lord Brocton's dragoons are in the village.”

“Brocton! O God! Brocton! My father is taken! And by Brocton!” She spoke aloud in her agitation, and I saw that she was cut to the quick. And I rejoiced, so strange is the human heart, that it was Lord Brocton's name that came in anguish off her tongue. Oh for one blow at the man whose father had harried mine into an untimely grave!

In sharp, frosty air sound travels far across the meadows of the Hanyards. The hills that hem the valley to the west perhaps act as a sounding board. Anyhow, further inquiry as to her trouble was stopped by the rattle of distant hoofs. We were standing now less than a dozen paces from the bridge. A straggling hedge, on a low bank,

crossed flush up to the bridge by a stile, cut the field off from the road. I rushed to the stile, and cautiously pushed my head through near the ground. Half a mile of level road stretched to my right towards the village, and along it, and now less than six hundred yards away, a squad of dragoons was galloping towards us. The hedge was thin and leafless, and there was not cover enough for a rabbit. I ran back. “Dragoons,” said I.

“After me,” she replied carelessly, and I saw that danger for herself left her cold.

I kicked the great jack motionless, flung him to the foot of the bank under the hedge, and the rod after him, hurried her up to the stile, leaped into the water, took her in my arms, and carried her under the bridge. In less than a minute after I stopped wading, the dragoons clattered overhead.

Not an hour ago I had been aching for life and adventures, and here I was, up to the loins in water, with a goddess in my arms. Her right arm was round my neck, and her cheek so near that I felt her sweet, warm breath fanning my own. As the sounds died away, I turned and looked at her face, and I had my reward. Her eyes told me that she thanked and trusted me.

“Well done, fisherman!” she said for the second time.

“You're heavier than the jack,” replied I, hitching her as far from the water as possible before wading back. A minute later I put her down on the bank with tumbled, yellow hair and face flaming red. I examined her critically, and cried triumphantly, “Not a stitch wet!”

CHAPTER II. THE SERGEANT OF DRAGOONS

I threw the jack across my shoulder and we started for the Hanyards. Madam offered no explanations, and I made no inquiries. It was obvious to me that the dragoons had gone on to the little hedge ale−house, a good, long mile away, where the road from the village struck into a roundabout road to Stafford. Here, in the “Bull and Mouth,” Mother Braggs ruled by day and Master Joe by night, and here beyond a doubt the stranger lady had tarried while her father had gone on with the horses to the nearest smithy at Milford.

There was ample time to get to the Hanyards, but still, for safety's sake, we kept behind hedges as far as possible. She walked ahead, and I followed behind, water oozing out of my boots and breeches at every step, and the jack's tail flopping against my legs. Never had I gone home from fishing with such prizes. What pleased me most was her silence. It matched the trust in her eyes. Except for brief instructions as to the direction, no word passed until we gained the Hanyards from the rear, and I led her into the house−place unobserved by anyone.

“There is little time to talk,” I began. “The dragoons are certain to come here, as this is the only house between the inn and the village. Your father is, you fear, a prisoner, and indeed it seems the only explanation of his absence. I do not ask why. I gather that there is no purpose to be served by your sharing his fate.”

“Free, I may be able to help him. A prisoner, I should....” She stopped, hesitating.

“My Lord Brocton?” said I interrogatively. For the second time her face burned, and I saw in it shame and distress and fear. My lord was piling up a second account with me, and for humbling this proud beauty he should one day pay the price in full.

But it was time to act. I ran to the porch and roared out, “Jane! Jane! Where are you? Come here quick!”

Jane came running in from the kitchen. She stopped dead with surprise when she saw my companion, and could not even cackle on about the jack.

“Now, Jane, do exactly what I say. Take this lady upstairs and dress her as nearly like yourself as you can. It's good you are much of a height. Pack her own clothes carefully out of sight. Off, quick!”

They disappeared upstairs, and I watched the yard gate with eager eyes. No dragoons appeared, and in a short time madam and Jane were back in the house−place. Jane had done her work well. The great lady was now a fine country serving−wench, her shapeliness obscured in a homespun gown that fitted only where it touched, her feet in huge, rough boots, her yellow hair plastered back off her forehead and bunched into one of Jane's 'granny caps,' and indeed totally hidden by the large flap thereof, which in Jane's case served the purpose of “keepin' the draf out'n 'er neck−hole” when she was at work in the dairy. For my share of disguising, I now rubbed together some ruddle and dry soil, and the mixture gave a necessary touch of coarseness to her hands. Altogether she was changed out of recognition, even if, which was not the case, any of her pursuers had seen her previously.

“Jane,” said I, “her name is Molly Brown. She has served here two years. Her mother lives at Colwich. Have you both got that?”

“Molly Brown—two years—mother at Colwich,” said madam with a smile, and Jane repeated it after her.

“Now, Molly,” said I, with an answering smile, “Jane will start you churning. It's an easy job. You just turn a handle till the butter comes. Do not flatter yourself that you'll get any butter, but I'll forgive you that. And, having learned from Jane how to pretend to do it, you need not churn in earnest till the dragoons ride into the yard. Listen to Jane, and you, Jane, for the next ten minutes, teach the lady how to talk Staffordshire fashion.”

“Rate y'are, Master Noll,” said Jane, who was plainly bursting with the importance of her task.

“First lesson, madam,” said I. “'Rate y'are,' not 'Right you are!' It was not Mr. Pope's manner of speech, but it will suit your circumstances better. Off to the dairy, and leave the dragoons to me!”

“Rate y'are, Master Noll,” said madam, and, our anxieties notwithstanding, we both joined in Jane's rattle of laughter.

They went off to the dairy, and I began my own preparations. I displayed the great jack in full view on the table, forestalling Kate's housewifely objections by disposing him on an old coat of mine, so that he should not mess the table. In the house−place he looked much finer and longer than in the open air, and I gloated over him as he lay there. I longed to change my clothes, not so much for comfort's sake as to cut a better figure in her eyes; but I dared not run the risk of not being at hand when the dragoons arrived. I drew a quart jug of ale, threw most

of it away, got down a horn drinking−cup, drank a little, spilled some down my clothes, slopped some on the table, made up the fire, and sat down to wait. It was now about half−past three, the straw−coloured sun was perching on the hill−tops, and darkness would soon be drawing on apace.

For perhaps a quarter of an hour I sat there, living over again the precious minutes under the bridge, when the clatter of hoofs awakened me to the realities of the situation. Peeping cautiously past the edge of the blind, I saw the dragoons—there were six of them—ride up to the gate. Sharp orders rang out, and three of the men dismounted, including him who had given the orders, and came up the yard. One stayed at the gate to mind the horses, and the other two trotted off on the scout round the fields near the farm.

I slipped back to my chair, and let my chin drop on my chest, as if I were dozing in drink.

Some one said at the porch door, “In the King's name!” I took no notice, and they crowded, jingling and noisy, into the porch. Again sharp commands were given; the two men grounded their arms with a clang on the stone floor of the porch, and waited there. The man in command stepped forward into the firelight and said crisply, “In the King's name!”

It was idle to pretend any longer. I raised my head and blinked drunkenly at him. Then I filled the horn, sang thickly and with beery gusto, “Here's a health unto His Majesty,” and said, “Fill up and drink, whoever you are, and shut the door. It's damned cold.”

He had little, red, ferrety eyes, and they looked fiercely at me —fiercely but not suspiciously, I thought. He waved my hospitality aside, and said, “You are Oliver Wheatman?”

“Oliver Wheatman of the Hanyards, Esquire, at His Majesty's service to command,” I replied with great gravity, and filled another horn of ale. I might pretend to be drunk, but I could not, unfortunately, pretend to drink, and it was strongish ale. He made a motion to stop me—welcome proof that he believed me tipsy in fact—and said, “Master Wheatman, the less drunken you are, the better you will answer my questions.”

“Sir,” said I, draining off the horn, “I can drink and talk with any man living, and, drunk or sober, I only answer the questions of my friends. So get a horn off the dresser—I'm a bit tired—fill up, and tell me what you want. D'you happen to be of my Lord Brocton's regiment?”

“I am.”

“Then you'll be as drunk as me before you've finished with the Hanyards. Our ale goes to the head most damnably quick, let me tell you. You tell my dear old butty, the worshipful Master Jack Dobson, that I've caught a jack half as thick and more than half as long as himself. Here it be. Fetch a horn, I tell you, and drink to me and the two jacks—Jack Dobson and this jack beauty here.”

He was getting no nearer to the object of his visit, and, perhaps thinking it would be well to humour me, he fetched a horn and tried our Hanyards ale. This gave me a chance of taking stock of him.

He was a thin, wiry man of middle height and middle age. Such a face I had never seen. The first sight of it made me suck in my breath as if I had touched the edge of a razor. The bridge half of his nose had gone, or he had never had it, and the lower half was stuck like a dab of putty midway between mouth and eyebrows. His little, beady eyes were set in large, shallow sockets, giving him an owl−like appearance. A mouth originally large enough, and thickly lipped like a negro's, had been extended, as it seemed, to his left ear by a savage sword slash which had healed very badly. He had an air of mean, perky intelligence, as of one of low rank and no breeding who had for many years been accustomed to cringe to the great and domineer over smaller fry than himself. Some sort of military rank he had, judging by his stained and frayed but once gaudy jacket. He carried a tuck of unusual length, stretching along his left side from heel to armpit, and a couple of pistols were stuck in his belt.

He put down the horn, smacked his lips, and began:

“Master Wheatman, I am searching for a Jacobite spy—a woman. We took her father up at the 'Barley Mow,' and I learned from a man of yours that the daughter was at his mother's ale−house down the road. She is not there, and left to walk to meet her father, she said. She has certainly not done that, and I have called to see if she is hiding here or hereabouts.”

“By gad, we'll nab her if she is,” said I heartily. “She's not been through that gate in the last half−hour, for it takes me that to drink yon jug dry, and I started with it full. But I'll ask the maids. Mother and our Kate are at the parson's yonder, gaping at you chaps. I dare say you saw them.”

“No,” said he doubtingly.

One of the men stepped out of the porch, saluted, and, being bidden to speak, informed his officer that he had

seen Lord Brocton and Mr. Cornet Dobson talking to two ladies.

“That'd be they,” I said, and going with unsteady steps to the door, I vigorously shouted, “Jin, Moll, Jin, Moll, come here! They're in the dairy,” I added by way of explanation.

The crucial moment came. Jane and 'Moll' scurried across the yard like rabbits, but stopped at the porch door with well−simulated surprise at the sight of the dragoons.

“Gom, I thawt 'e'd set the house a−fire,” said Jane thankfully, addressing the company at large, and she bravely bustled through and shrilled at me, “At it again, when your mother's out; y'd better get off to bed afore she comes in. She'll drunk yer.”

Jane's acting was so much better than mine that I nearly lost my head at being thus crudely accused before 'Moll,' but she went on remorselessly, addressing the dragoon, “Dunna upset him for God's sake, Master Squaddy. 'E'm a hell−hound when 'e'm gotten a sup of beer in'im.”

“Don't trouble, my good girl. I'm used to his sort. Leave him to me and answer my questions. The truth or the jail, my girl.”

“Yow,” sniffed Jane, “he'd snap yow in two like a carrot. Bed's best place for 'im. He's as wet as thatch with his silly jacking.”

“Jane,” said I, “never mind me. I'm neither dry enough nor drunk enough to go to bed yet. Captain here wants to ask you and Moll some questions. Stop clacking at me like a hen at a weasel and listen to him.”

Jane went through the ordeal easily, appealing to 'Moll' for verification at every turn, and so cleverly that the latter appeared to be as much under examination as herself. Moreover, Jane stood square in the firelight, but so as to keep 'Moll' shouldered behind the chimney in comparative gloom. They'd been churning all afternoon, the butter was there to be seen, stacks of it; nobody had been in or near the yard; the gate had never clicked once, and nobody could open it without being heard in the dairy. She overwhelmed the dragoon with her demonstrations of the impossibility of anybody coming up the yard without her or 'Moll' knowing it.

“That's all right, Jane,” said I, at length. “But she could easily have got into the house or into the stables without you or Moll seeing her. Let's all have a look for her. Unless she's small enough to creep into a rat−hole, we'll soon find her.”

Sergeant Radford—to give him his name and rank, which I learned later from Jack Dobson—agreed to this, and in my joy at knowing that the ordeal was over, I was on the point of forgetting that I was drunk till I caught the clear eyes of madam fixed in warning on me. Jane acted as leader to the two dragoons in overhauling the barns and stabling, while 'Moll,' the sergeant, and I searched the house as closely as if we were looking for a lost guinea. Of course our efforts were futile, slow as we were so as not to outpace my drunken footsteps, and careful as we were so as to satisfy the keen eyes of the sergeant, who was very evidently on no new job so far as he was concerned. 'Moll' too seemed jealous of Jane's laurels, and went thoroughly into the business. She and the serjeant peeped together under beds and into closets, and she laughed brazenly at certain not very obscure hints of his as to the great services I should render to the search−party if I kept my eye on the house−place. She even said, “Master Noll, don't 'e think as 'ow th' ale be gettin' flat downstairs? It wunna be wuth drinkin' if y'ain't sharp.”

The result was, that in about half an hour a thoroughly satisfied and rather tired assembly filled the house−place, for the two scouts rode up to the porch with the news that they, too, had found no trace of the fugitive. With the sergeant's leave I sent the five dragoons into the kitchen with the two maids to have a jug of ale apiece, while he stayed with me in the house−place, to crack a bottle of wine.

I hoped, but in vain, that he would tell me news of the stranger's father, but he was too wary for that, and I did not dare to ask him. He made close inquiries as to the lie of the land hereabouts, and I pointed out that there was a field−path leading plainly to the village from the other side of the bridge and coming out at an obscure stile at the back of the “Barley Mow.” The spy might have taken that and become alarmed. She could then avoid the village by another plain path, and so get ahead of the troops on the Stafford road.

“But what for? Who's to help her there, Master Wheatman?”

“Ask me another, Captain,” said I. “But a wise woman would know where to find friends, and Stafford's full of papishes, burn 'em!”

“Ah!”

“There's Bulbrook and Pippin Pat and Ducky Bellows; there's old sack−face, the parson there, as good as a papist, very near. You keep your eyes on those big houses in the East Gate. As for me, look at that back and breast

and good broad−sword there. Damn me if I don't rub 'em up and come and have a ding with 'em at these rebels. On Naseby Field they were, Captain, long before your time and mine, but they did good work against these same bloody Stuarts. Crack t'other bottle, there's a good fellow. I'm dry with talking and wet with fishing, and it'll do me good."

I pressed him to stay and 'have a good set to,' but he refused, and after drinking enough to keep me dizzy for a week, he nipped out and ordered his men to horse. I walked to the gate with him. He thanked me for my help and good cheer, and said it was quite clear that the spy was nowhere in or near the Hanyards. I renewed my greetings to Cornet Dobson and even sent my respects to his lordship. Off they rode, and it was with a thankful heart that, remembering my happy condition in time, I stumbled back up the yard to the house−place, where madam and beaming Jane were awaiting me.

CHAPTER III. MISTRESS MARGARET WAYNFLETE

Jane had taken the lady back to the house−place and was hovering around her, with little of the grace of a maid−of−honour to be sure, but with a heartiness and zeal that more than atoned for any lack of style. From mother's withdrawing−room I fetched our chief household god, a small ancient silver goblet, and, filling it with wine, offered it to the stranger with what I supposed, no doubt wrongly, to be a modish bow. She drank a little, and then, at my urging, a little more.

“Madam,” I said, “I think you do not need to be 'Molly Brown' any longer. Yon dragooner is quite certain that you are not here, and we can safely take advantage of his opinion. As for you, Jane, you've done splendidly, and I heartily thank you.” I re−filled the goblet and handed it to Jane, saying, “Drink, Jane, to madam's good luck.”

The honest girl blushed with joy at my words, and as for drinking wine out of the famous silver goblet of the Hanyards—such a distinction, as she conceived it, was reward enough for anything.

“Thanks are payment all too poor for what you have done, sir,” said madam, “and any words of mine would make them poorer still. But, sir, I do thank you most heartily. And you, too, Jane, have done me splendid service. You are as brave and clever as you are bonny and pretty.”

“Madam,” said I, bowing low, “you are too kind to my services, which have, indeed, been rather crudely performed.”

“Not so,” she replied, “but with shrewd, ready wit and certain judgment. I cannot imagine myself in a tighter corner than at the bridge, and your device had the effective simplicity of genius. Your plan here was, to be sure, commonplace, but it, too, required caution and good acting, and you and Jane supplied both. It was nicer than popping me into some musty priest's hole, though I expect this ancient building has one.”

I looked at the wall as half expecting the sword of Captain Smite−and−spare−not Wheatman to rattle to the ground under this awful insinuation.

“The only use our family has found for priests, madam,” I said, “has been, I fear, to hunt them like vermin. As a Wheatman of the Hanyards, I'm afraid I'm a degenerate.”

“You'll not even be that much longer if I keep you from getting into some dry clothes. And, if Jane is willing, I will make myself myself. I would fain be on.”

With a sweet smile and a gracious curtsy, she followed the ready Jane upstairs.

I removed all traces of what had taken place, and carried my precious jack into the pantry, where I hung him in safety. He should be set up by Master Whatcot of Stafford as a trophy and memento in honour of this great day. I then hurried off to my room to attend to my own appearance, and indeed I needed it, for I was caked with mud up to my knees and soaking wet up to my waist. For the first time in my life I was grieved to the bone at the inadequacy of my wardrobe, and even when I had donned my Sunday best my appearance was undoubtedly villainous from the London point of view. I feathered myself as finely as my resources permitted, but it was a homely, uncouth yeoman that raced downstairs and awaited her coming. I drew the curtains, lit the candles, kicked the fire into a blaze, and built it up with fresh logs.

It would be impossible for me to set down the hubbub of thoughts and ideas that filled my mind. I had been plunged into a new world, and floundered about in it pretty hopelessly, I can tell you. The days of knight−errantry had come over again, and chance, mightier even than King Arthur, had commanded me to serve a sweet lady in distress. But I had had no training, no preliminary squireship, in which I could learn how things were done by watching brave and accomplished knights do them. I had lived among the parts of speech, not among the facts of life. I could hit a bird on the wing, snare a rabbit, ride like a saddle, angle for jack and trout, strike like a sledge−hammer, swim like a fish—and that was all. I knew, too, every turn and track and tree for miles round; and that might be something now, and indeed, as will be seen, turned out my most precious accomplishment. Some people said I was as proud as Lucifer, others that I was as meek as a mouse, and I once overheard our Kate tell Priscilla Dobson, Jack's vinegary sister, that both were right—which confounded me, for our 'Copper Nob,' as I used to call her, was a shrewd little woman. Still, such as I was, the stranger lady should have me, an she would, as her squire, to the last breath in my body. Only let me get out of my cabbage−bed, only give me a man's work to do, and I would ask for no more. Neither for love nor for liking would I crave, but just for the work and the joy of

it.

The yard gate clicked, and a moment later mother and Kate came in.

“Oh, Noll, it's been grand!” burst out Kate. “I wish you'd been there. There were hundreds upon hundreds of soldiers, horse and foot, and guns and wagons without end. Lord Brocton was there, and Sir Ralph Sneyd, who is just a duck, and a nasty−looking major with his face all over blotches. And they saw us, and crowded into the vicar's to talk to us.”

“And what about Jack Dobson?”

“Oh, Oliver, what have you got your best clothes on for?”

“Because I got wet through catching a great jack. But never mind my best clothes. How did Jack look in his uniform?”

“A lot better than Lord Brocton, or anyone else there, if you must know,” she said, jerking the words at me, with her cheeks near the colour of her hair.

“Can he talk sense yet?”

“He talked like the modest gentleman he is,” said my mother, “and looked nearly as handsome as my own boy. He sent his loving greetings to you, and would fain have come to see you but his duties would not allow of it.”

Of course my gibes at Jack were all purely foolish and jealous, and, moreover, I could now afford to be truthful; so I said, “If Jack doesn't do better, as well as look better, than my Lord Brocton, I'll thrash him soundly when he gets back. But he will. He's a rare one is Master Jack, and by a long chalk the pluckiest soul, boy or man, I've ever come across. And he'll learn sense, of the sort he wants, as fast as anybody when the time comes.”

“Of course the lad will,” said mother, taking off her long cloak, and Kate, when mother turned to hang it on its accustomed hook, gave a swift peck at my cheek with her lips, and whispered, “You dear old Noll!”

All this time I had been listening with strained ears for footsteps on the stairs. Now I heard them, and waited anxiously. The door opened, and Jane came in, upright and important. She curtsyed to my mother, announced, “Mistress Margaret Waynflete,” and my goddess came into the room.

Straight up to my mother she walked,—a poor word to describe her sweet and stately motion, *et vera incessu patuit dea*, as the master has it,—curtsied low and nobly to her and said, “Mistress Wheatman, I am a stranger in distress, and should have been in danger but for your son, who has served me and saved me as only a brave and courteous gentleman could.”

I had ever loved my mother dearly, but I loved her proudly now, for the greatest dame in the land could not have done better than this sweet, simple mother of mine. Without surprise or hesitation, she took Mistress Waynflete's hands in her own, and said, “Dear lady, anyone in distress is welcome here, and Oliver has done just as I would have him do. And this is my daughter, Kate, who will share our anxiety to help you.”

And then I was proud of our Kate, Kate with the red hair and the milk−white face, the saucy eye and the shrewd tongue, Kate with the tradesman's head and the heart of gold. She shook madam warmly by the hand, and led her to my great arm−chair in the ingle−nook as to a throne that was hers of right.

Thus was Mistress Waynflete made welcome to the Hanyards.

Mother and Kate took their accustomed seats on the cosy settle beside the hearth. I sat on a three−legged stool in front of the fire, and Jane flitted about as quietly as a bat, laying the table for our evening meal.

Never had the house−place at the Hanyards looked so fair. The firelight danced on the black oak wainscot which age and polishing had made like unto ebony, and the row of pewter plates on the top shelf of the dresser glimmered in their obscurity like a row of moons. Our special pride, a spice−cupboard of solid mahogany, ages old, glowed red across the room, and from the neighbouring wall the great sword and back−and−breast with which Smite−and−spare−not Wheatman, Captain of Horse, had done service at Naseby, seemed to twinkle congratulations to me as one not unworthy of my name. Not an unsuitable frame, perhaps, this ancient, goodly house−place, for the beautiful picture now in it, on which I looked as often as I dared with furtive eyes of admiration.

She told her story with simple directness. Her father's name was Christopher Waynflete, a soldier by profession, who had seen service in many parts of the Continent and had attained the rank of Colonel in the Swedish army. Her mother she had never known, for she had died when Mistress Margaret was but a few months old, and her father had maintained an unbroken reticence on the subject. Some six months ago, Colonel Waynflete

had returned to England to settle, desiring to obtain some military employment, a plan which his long service and professional knowledge seemed to make feasible. In London he made the acquaintance of the Earl of Ridgeley, to whom, indeed, he bore a letter of introduction from a Swedish diplomat in Paris. Through the Earl he had met Lord Brocton, the Earl's only son and heir. The Colonel's hope of employment in the army had not been realized, and this and certain other reasons, which she did not specify, had embittered him against the Government. Not having any real allegiance to King George, whom he had never served, and who now refused his services, he easily entered into the plans of certain influential Jacobites in London whose acquaintance he had made. Three days previously he had set out from London to join Prince Charles. For certain reasons (again she did not give details) she was unwilling to be separated from her father, at any rate not until circumstances made it necessary for them to part, and then the plan was that she should go to Chester, with which city she was inclined to think her father had some old connexion, and stay there with the wife of a certain cathedral dignitary of secret but strong Jacobite inclinations. Colonel Waynflete's connexion with the Jacobite cause had, naturally, been kept secret, but she was almost certain that Lord Brocton had discovered it through a certain spy and toady of his, one Major Tixall.

“Pimples all over his face?” broke in Kate.

“Yes,” said Mistress Waynflete, with a little shudder.

“He was in the village this afternoon with Lord Brocton,” returned Kate.

“Peace, dear one,” said mother, “our turn is coming. Be as quiet as Oliver.”

“Oliver, mother dear, hasn't seen Major Tixall, whose face is enough to make an owl talk, let alone a magpie like me.”

Her right ear was near enough to me, the stool being big and I bigger, so I pinched the pretty little pink shell, and whispered in it, “Shut up, Kit, and think of Jack,” which effectually silenced her.

Mistress Waynflete had little more to tell. They had travelled rapidly, avoiding Coventry and Lichfield, where the royal forces had assembled, but bending west so as to get by unfrequented roads to Stafford, and so on to the main north road along which the Prince was now reported to be marching. Just outride the “Bull and Mouth” her horse had cast a shoe. Leaving her to rest in the ale−house, the Colonel had gone on with the horses to the nearest smithy at Milford. He was quite unaware of the northward movement of troops from Lichfield, and was under the impression that he was now well beyond the danger zone. We had heard from the serjeant of his capture.

Kate, at mother's request, took up the tale here. The road past the Hanyards to the village enters the main road abruptly, and clumps of elms prevent anyone travelling along it from seeing what is happening in the village. The vicarage is opposite the smithy and the inn, and when mother and Kate got there, only a few dragoons were about. They watched the Colonel ride up, leading his daughter's horse, and saw him turn round at once and attempt to go back as soon as he caught sight of the dragoons; but a larger body, under the command of Major Tixall, cantered in at the moment and, trapped between the two bodies, the Colonel had been compelled to surrender. He was kept until my Lord Brocton's arrival nearly an hour later, and had then been sent on to Stafford under a strong guard.

This was the only fresh piece of information that was of any importance. There is a jail at Stafford, and no doubt the Colonel was by now lodged in it.

“I fear that my views, or at any rate my father's views, make me a dangerous guest,” said Mistress Waynflete, “though your kindness has made me a welcome one.”

“Madam,” I said coldly, “the only politics I know is that my Lord Brocton is fighting against the Stuart, and if by fighting for the Stuart I can get in a fair blow at my Lord Brocton, I fight for the Stuart.”

“Oliver,” said mother, “it is wrong—I say nothing about its wisdom—to choose sides in such matters on grounds of personal enmity.”

“Lord Brocton's a beast,” said Kate shortly.

Mistress Waynflete had turned a richer colour at the mention of Brocton's name, but at Kate's words she became scarlet, and for that I vowed I would knock him on the head as ruthlessly as if he were a buck rabbit as soon as I got the chance.

She recovered and continued her story, but as it only concerned my share in the day's doings, it is unnecessary to repeat it here. She told it, however, in such kind terms, that I made an end to my discomfort by going to fetch the great jack for mother and Kate to look at. When returning, however, I could not help hearing Kate say to Mistress Waynflete, “Without a 'by your leave'?”

“As indifferently as if I had been a bag of flour,” was the cool reply. And I had dithered like an aspen leaf!

“I suppose he half drowned you?”

“On the contrary, there was not a wet stitch on me.”

“Oliver,” added my mother, “has not many things to do that are worth his doing, but what he finds he does well.”

“Such as catching jack,” said I, staggering in with my heavy load. It was admired unstintingly, and was indeed worthy of all praise.

“Supper is ready, mam,” said Jane; “and Joe says he knowed it wor as big as a gate−post.”

“And where is Joe?”

“In the kitchen, Master Noll.”

“Give him a good supper, not much ale, and that small, and tell him to stop there. I shall want him.” Then, turning to Mistress Waynflete, I went on: “There's one way, and only one, into Stafford that's perfectly safe to−night. Joe and I will row you there. Now, mother, I'm hungrier than the great jack ever was.”

CHAPTER IV. OUR JOURNEY COMMENCES

I have already said that the river was the boundary of the Hanyards on the side towards the village. About a hundred yards above the pocket of deep water where the jack had lain, I had built a little covered dock, and here I kept a craft, half boat and half punt, which I used for my fishing, and in which mother and Kate could lie on cushions while I rowed them on the river on warm summer nights. It was heavy and ungainly, but very comfortable, and as safe as the ark.

Joe received the information that he was to row to Stafford as cheerfully as an invitation to a jug of beer, and went off whistling to get the boat ready.

Everything that care could suggest was done for Mistress Waynflete's comfort. Jane carried down to the boat two huge stone beer bottles, filled with boiling water. Mother insisted on madam taking her thick hooded cloak, shaped like a fashionable domino, and covering her from head to ankles. Kate slipped into my pocket a pint flask of her extra special concoction of peppermint cordial, the best possible companion on a night like this. Jane came back and returned again laden with rugs and cushions, and soon reported that the boat was ready.

Mother and Kate, with Jane behind them, came to the garden gate to bid us farewell. Little was said, for Mistress Waynflete was too moved by their kindness to say much, and I was too preoccupied. Madam kissed them all in turn and murmured a good−bye. I kissed mother and Kate, and they wished me a good voyage and a safe return. We turned our faces riverward and started.

It was now nearly eight o'clock. The night was pitch−dark, the sky star−studded and moonless. It was freezing hard, the keen air stung our faces, the tiniest twig was finger−thick with hoar−frost, and the grass crunched under our feet at every step. I went ahead as guide, and in five minutes we arrived at the dock, where Joe, the boat out, cushioned and trim for the voyage, was vigorously slapping his hands crosswise round his waist to keep them warm. He held the boat up to the bank, I stepped in, handed in Mistress Waynflete, bestowed her with all possible comfort, settled by her side, and took the ropes. Then Joe, clambering in, pushed off and the voyage began.

It was up−stream, but fortunately the current was gentle, though there was a fair amount of water coming down. There was, or rather would have been on an ordinary night, no danger of discovery, since the river was half a mile from the main road at our starting−place, and ran still farther away from it for nearly two miles. Then came the one possible danger−spot on such a night as this, with the road occupied by troops on the march. A long bend in the river took it so close to the road that the yard of a wayside inn ran right down to the water. If we got safely past this, all danger would be over till we ran sheer up to the ruined wall of the town. The moon would not rise for two hours, so there was ample time for our row of about five miles.

“I trust you are comfortable, madam?” I said.

“Comfortable and warm and cosy,” she replied. “But for my fears for my father I should even be happy, for it has never before been my lot, and I have wandered far and wide over half Europe, to experience such and so much kindness in one day from perfect strangers.”

“I am, indeed, happy in my mother and sister. They are pearls of great price.”

“None better in all Staffordsheer,” said Joe.

“You have rendered me a greater service than you know of, and I must not let you leave yourself out.” To hide a note of wistfulness in her voice, she added mischievously, “Must I, Joe?”

“Yow could find wus'n' Wheatman o' th' 'Anyards,” said Joe, with sturdy precision of praise.

“Is he really a hell−hound, Joe, when he's got a sup of beer in him? I've no clear notion what a hell−hound is, but clearly it means something as bad, say, as a janissary—the worst animal I ever came across.”

“Sup o' beer in 'im,” snorted Joe contemptuously. “He dunna really know what beer is, my lady. It's a grand thing is beer, if y'll only tak' enough of it to do y' good, but there's no vartue in half a pint of it. I've told 'im that lots of times. But it's God's truth, my lady, 'e dunna want no beer, dunna Master Noll, to mak 'im 'it like the kick of a 'oss. I on'y brought 'im a few daceys up t'ouse this mawnin', an'—”

“You row harder, Joe, and yawp less,” said I, interrupting him. “Between you and Jane I shan't have a rag of character left.”

“Sup o' beer in him,” he growled, and spat loudly on his hands. Joe looked at all men as potential customers of

the “Bull and Mouth,” and judged them accordingly.

“I know the worst about you now, Master Wheatman, and by way of providing you with a less embarrassing topic of conversation, you might tell me what we shall do when we get to Stafford.”

“We are going to Marry−me−quick's.”

She started so abruptly that I laughed outright, and Joe rumbled like an overloaded wagon. I explained.

“We shall approach the town on the south side where the wall comes down to the river. 'Marry−me−quick' is not, as you seem to suppose, a disagreeable process, but an agreeable old woman who lives in a cottage which backs on to the river. Every schoolboy in the town knows her by that name, which is also the name of a kind of toffee she makes, and by the sale of which she earns a modest living. I cannot tell you how the name originated, but there it is. I went to the grammar school in the town, and in my time I must have bought and consumed some hundredweights of her 'marry−me−quick.' In her tiny cottage you may rest in safety while I hunt up Jack Dobson and learn what has been done with your father.”

“An' if I'd got a shilling,” said the irrepressible Joe, “for every pat of butter I've taken owd Marry−me−quick, I'd—I'd—”

He seemed lost for words, so I assisted him, and paid him back at the same time, by saying, “Pluck up courage enough to speak to Jane.”

“That's rate, Master Noll.”

“Is Jane so very fond of money, Joe?” asked Mistress Waynflete curiously.

“No,” said Joe. “She ain't grasping, ain't Jin. She told me t'nate, she c'd 'ave 'ad a mint of money if she'd liked, but she wouldna tak' it. Said it would 'a' burnt 'er fingers. 'More fool yow,' says I; 'it'd 'a' soon gotten cowd weather like this'n.' But Jin's all rate. Er'll never bre'k 'er arm at church door, wunna Jin.”

I explained to Mistress Waynflete that a woman who broke her arm at the church door was a housewifely maiden who became a slatternly housewife after marriage. “There's no fear of Jane doing that,” she replied; “she's as good as the guineas she would not take.”

For a space silence fell on us. All my attention was required to keep the boat clear of the banks, for the little river turned and twisted through its meadows like a hunted hare. There was only the starlight to steer by, but I had fished every yard of the river, and knew it so well that I gave Joe a clear channel to row in. Not a sound jarred on the rhythmic purr of the oars in the rowlocks and the gentle lapping of the stream against the bow. This day had God been very good to me. This was life as I would have it; work to do for brain and brawn, and a woman to do it for who was worth the uttermost that was in me. Romance had flushed the drab night of my life with a rosy dawn, and my heart was lifted up within me. If it faded away, there would at least be the memory of it. But it might not fade. I was under no illusions as to the stiffness of my task. I was matched against the powers that be, against my Lord Brocton, whose ability to work this maiden ill was increased a thousandfold by his military authority. I saw my way into Stafford, and I saw no more, not even my way out of it, and least of all my way out of it with the Colonel rescued and restored to his daughter. Mistress Waynflete had been so determined in her decision to follow her father that perhaps she had some plan in mind. She said nothing if she had, and if she had, it would, I supposed, depend on her woman's power of influencing Brocton. The future was as black as the outlook along the river, but I faced it eagerly.

She broke the silence: “The last boat I was in was a gondola. It was on a perfect night in a Venetian June, the sky a sapphire sprinkled with diamonds, the warm, scent−laden air filled with murmurings and snatches of song. And there was no danger.”

“Romance, perchance,” said I.

“You cannot have a one−sided romance. Romance is an atmosphere breathed by two, not an emotion felt by one. To be sure, he was the most appallingly in earnest lover woman ever had. He wept for a kiss with his fingers twiddling on the hilt of his stiletto. Dear heart, these Italians!”

“I should like to meet his countship,” said I energetically.

“Yes, he was a count, with a pedigree as long as the Rialto, and he had not two silver piastres to rub against each other. He was the handsomest man I have even seen. Fortunately, we left Venice before he had quite decided that it was time to dig his knife into me.”

“You speak lightly of your danger, madam,” I said coldly.

“A hot−blooded Italian with a stiletto in his hand is a much more desirable creature, let me tell you, than a

cold−blooded Englishman with the devil in his heart. That fiery little count, conceited and poverty−stricken, did at any rate pay me the compliment of thinking for at least a fortnight that I was a patch of heaven fallen in his way, whereas to your cold−livered English lord I am no more than an appetizing dish."

She was not speaking lightly now, but with cold, concentrated anger. I remembered the reticencies of her statement at the Hanyards, and began to see dimly some of the connecting links in her story. My Lord Brocton's character was well enough known to be the subject of common talk at our market ordinaries. My very manhood shamed me in the presence of this queenly woman, marked down by a titled blackguard as his quarry, and I sat still, fists tightly clenched on the tiller−ropes, and said nothing, waiting for her to speak again.

"I have seen to−day, Master Wheatman," she said, "a sight I have never seen before—a beautiful English maiden growing up to womanhood in the calm and safety of an English country home. You will be tempted, I know, to envy me my wanderings, my experiences, my freedom, but, believe me, I would rather be your sweet Kate in the quiet of the Hanyards."

"It isn't as quiet as it might be when Jack's about," said I, seeking to change the current of her thoughts. Then I had to tell her all about Jack, and our boyish escapades and fightings and friendings, and because I had earlier in the day though evil of dear Jack, I now could say nothing good enough about him.

It was time to relieve Joe at the oars. At first he would not agree, for, he said, he'd been "lagging a bit during the day 'long o' them squaddies," and wanted to put in a day's work.

"You will, before you've done, Joe, for you've got to pull the boat back. So have a swig of beer and we'll change over. And madam shall acknowledge the virtues of our Kate's peppermint cordial."

Joe shipped his oars and reached out for his bottle of beer. I got out the flask and said in a sing−song voice: "Take two gallons of the best Hollands money can buy, and add thereto, first, four pounds of choice Barbados sugar, and, secondly, two bushels of freshly gathered leaves of the plant peppermint. Steep together for a whole moon, stirring the concoction every four hours during the daytime, and as often as you wake o' nights. Strain through a piece of linen, if you've got one; if not, do what our Kate did this year, use a fair maiden's silk stocking. The result is a drink fit for the gods, and, indeed, one which may even be offered to goddesses. Drink, madam!"

She was laughing merrily before I had finished. "Kate's stocking sounds the most innocent ingredient in it, Master Wheatman, but I must try her skill in brewing."

She did so, and pronounced it excellent but strong. I tried it too, rather more copiously, I confess. Indeed, it was good, but to me, I know, the charm of the cordial this time lay in the thought of the rich red lips that had touched the flask before mine.

Joe and I then changed places, and I kept hard at the oars until we came to the reach which ran close up to the "Why Not." Here Joe resumed the oars and I the ropes.

"This is the only danger−spot," I said. "Yonder are the lights of the ale−house. On an ordinary night there would be no one about, even if it mattered if there were, but to−night, when it does matter, there are thousands of soldiers on the march, and there is some risk of our being observed."

In another five minutes or so we heard faint snatches of song and bursts of applause, and shouting and laughing. The "Why Not" was now about a hundred yards ahead on our left. On the right the bank was lined with willows which, not having been pollarded for many years, stretched their long, thin branches well over the river. I ran the boat as far under them as I could. Joe pulled with short, soft strokes, and we crept slowly along. For a minute the lighted windows were obscured by the outhouses, and just as I caught sight of them again, a door was flung open, and the jumble of noises swelled into a roar of jeering laughter. A young woman flew out, heedlessly and noisily as a flustered hen, and a burly soldier lurched after her down the yard. At a whisper, Joe shipped his oars, and I ran the boat right into the bank. I grabbed in the dark for a hold−to, and luckily seized the roots of a willow. At his end Joe did the same. We hardly dared to breathe as we watched the doings on the other bank.

Lust, of blood or worse, and the fear of it, were there. The lighted windows and the open door made every movement of the man and the girl clearly visible. No one followed them. It was so ordinary an event to the company, perhaps that it was not worth while leaving mirth and beer to see the issue. But all serious elements in their affair changed abruptly and to our instant jeopardy. On the very edge of the water the girl, knowing her whereabouts to an inch, turned cleverly. The man, a stranger obviously, ran on and pitched clean and far into the river, while she, laughing and triumphant, scuttled back to the house. Her tale brought out at once a spurt of men, yelling with joy, to watch the fun. Some of them had snatched up lanterns and lighted candles, and they were

followed later by a fresh, older, shrieking woman who carried a huge, burning brand plucked from the hearth.

Happily for us the river was shallow, for a couple of strokes would have brought the man clean into us. The shock of the icy water sobered him. He splashed and spluttered to his feet, climbed up the bank like a giant water−rat, and would have slunk towards the house; but the rabble were on him before he had taken a dozen paces, and tormented him till he roared like a wounded bull. The woman with the brand cried out on him with vile words that made my face burn in the dark, and belaboured him about the head with her blazing cudgel. At every blow a shower of sparks flew out that drove his rollicking mates into a ring around them at a safe distance away. The man must have been set afire had he not been soused in the river beforehand. None of his fellows tried to help him, just as before none had tried to hinder him. It was his look out either way, and they enjoyed his discomfiture with all the gusto of children. At last the breathless woman and the cowed man came to a parley, the result of which was that, with a whoop of “pots round,” they all crowded back into the ale−house, and we were once more alone on the river.

“The ordeal by water and by fire,” I said. “Push out, Joe.”

“Gom! Owd Bess give 'im sock,” he replied, and levered the nose of the boat into midstream again.

Although there was no real need for it, the escape kept us all quiet. I persuaded Mistress Waynflete to lie down, so as to avoid the biting wind that was sweeping across the river, and Joe and I by turns made such progress that in less than an hour we drew up to the town meadow.

The greatest caution was now necessary, since we saw that the bridge leading into the town was thronged with people, many carrying lanterns or torches. The town wall ran parallel to the river, on our right, with a narrow fringe of meadow between them. Here the wall was for the most part tumbled into ruins, and in the gaps stood little cottages, built in part of the stones that had once formed the wall. In one of these lived little old Marry−me−quick, Mistress Martha Tonks, to give her her christening name, and we ran up to the bank level with her place without being observed from the bridge, although it was only a few boat−lengths distant.

I stepped cautiously out and tiptoed to her back window. There the ancient maiden was, busily engaged in the manufacture of her staple, no doubt in anticipation of a greater demand for it in these stirring days, when much extra money would be passing around in the town, and many pennies thereof would dribble into the pockets of the youngsters. I lifted the latch and stepped in. She squeaked with affright till she saw who it was, and then turned her note into a gurgle of astonishment.

“Are you alone?” I asked. She nodded. “Just a minute then, and I'll be back again, with a visitor. Keep quiet!”

I returned to the boat, and as I was obliged to move as stealthily as a cat, I could not help, as I approached, hearing Joe say emphatically, “I wunna.” I cursed him silent, without troubling to ask what he was objecting to, and handed Mistress Waynflete out.

“Now, Joe,” I whispered, “off you go back! The moon will be up in a few minutes, and you ought to do it in an hour. You can sit in the kitchen all to−morrow to make up for this.”

“Jin said 'er'd sit up for me,” he said, and I was glad he had such a good motive to keep him up to his hard task.

“Good−bye, Joe,” said Mistress Waynflete, shaking the good fellow warmly by the hand. “Give my loving remembrances to your mistresses and to Jane. Say how grateful I am.”

“Good−bye, my lady,” he said simply, “and God bless you.” So that only I could hear him, he added, “Tak' good keer on 'er, Master Noll. Jin's awful sot on 'er, and wunna luk at me if any 'arm 'appens 'er.”

I gripped his hard hand, gave him my parting message home, and then crouched and pushed the boat into and down the stream. As I lifted my hand from her and she glided into the blackness, I felt in my heart that the last link with the old life was broken. Then, as I rose to my feet, a hand was placed on my arm, and I tingled in every fibre at this sweet link with the new life.

CHAPTER V. THE ANCIENT HIGH HOUSE

I had found Mistress Tonks in her little back room, where she manufactured marry−me−quick by day and slept by night. Her cottage contained only one other room, serving as shop and living room, and fronting on a narrow lane which turned abruptly from the main street at the bridge−end to follow the curve of the walls. By the time I returned with Mistress Waynflete she had shuttered the window of the shop, snuffed the candles, and stirred the fire into a blaze.

Marry−me−quick was an ancient, wizened, little woman, so small that she hardly escaped being a dwarf, humpbacked, and inexpressibly ugly. In times not so long gone by she would assuredly have burned as a witch, and many supposed her to be in league with the evil one. But in actual fact she was a cheery, voluble, and warm−hearted little body, and one on whom I could rely to serve us in this pinch.

“Mistress Tonks,” I said, “I want you to shelter this lady for the night.”

“To be sure,” chirped the little woman. “Luckily I've kept the sojers off. Every house in the town is full of 'em, and the Mayor's at his wits' end to know how to stuff 'em all in. I should think a score of 'em have come here, in ones, and twos, and threes; and when I stood bold up to them and said, 'Do you want any marry−me−quick?' they were off like scared rabbits. A great, sweet lady like you wouldn't think it, of course, but it's a godsend at times for a lone woman when she's ugly enough to turn cream sour, and somedeal crooked o' the body into the bargain.”

“I shall certainly desire some marry−me−quick,” said Mistress Waynflete, deftly evading the awkward conclusion of this speech, “for Master Wheatman has described it in terms that make my mouth water. And though you do not want to billet soldiers, you will, I know, befriend a soldier's daughter.”

“I should befriend the devil's dam, asking your ladyship's pardon, if Master Wheatman brought her here. I'm a little, lone, ugly woman, but Master Noll always stood by me. The lads, drat 'em, were for ever pinching Master Dobson's bull's−eyes and gingerbread, and him mayor of the town, though he's got lots grander than that since, but they never pinched any marry−me−quick, not in Master Noll's time. But he's gone now, and I'm not as nimble as I used to be. Jesus help me, how he had used to fight! He used to put my heart in my mouth, coming in here all blood and muck to wash himself afore he went home. But take your things off and make yourself at home.”

“I'm afraid you'll hear a too full and too true account of me, madam, while I am away,” said I. “Soldiers are likely to call, but you can leave Mistress Tonks to deal with them. Still, please discard your own jacket and hat, and wear mother's domino. It's homely and country−like, and you must pull the hood over your head, since, if your hair has been described, and any soldier who calls has heard of it, he will have to be blind not to notice it.”

“Yes, it's dreadful stuff,” she said, with amusing meekness.

“So dreadful, madam,” said I soberly, “that all England cannot match it. Therefore you must hide it, lest it should shock some poor soldier who comes seeking a billet and finds it.”

She took off her hat, preparing to do what I asked, and the wondrous yellow hair, coils upon coils of it, was revealed. “Jesus help me,” said little Marry−me−quick in a hushed voice, “the back of her head looks like a harvest moon. If the same God that made her ladyship made me, we shall begin life in heaven with a row, that's all I've got to say.”

I smiled at the quaint conceit of the little woman, which lost its irreverence towards God in its reverence for His handiwork. “Now mother Tonks,” said I, “I leave this lady in your charge for a time while I go into the town to see Master Dobson. I may be away some time, and you'll get us some supper. Anything you have will do.”

“Anything I have?” she echoed scornfully. “I've got one of them rabbits you sent me last market day by that lozzicking Joe Braggs, but he's a good gorby is Joe”—here her voice softened, and madam smiled agreement—“and this frost has kept it as sweet as a nut. If you're not too hungry to wait, I'll make you some rabbit−stew.”

“Rabbit−stew? I'll wait for that, and I'm sure Mistress Waynflete will,” said I.

“I'll live on marry−me−quick in the meantime,” she replied, laughing.

“I leave you then in good hands, and hope to come back with cheerful news,” I said, bowing low, and stepped forth on my errand.

I turned to the left and fifty paces brought me into the main street. A gun and a train of wagons were rumbling over the bridge, convoyed by a handful of dragoons and a riff−raff of noisy lads and lasses. Late and cold as it was, the main street was thronged as on a fair day at noon. Most of the shops, especially those that dealt in provisions, were open and full of vociferous customers, while every alehouse was a pandemonium. The street was choked with townspeople and soldiery; lanterns flickered and torches flamed; oath and jest, bravado and buffoonery, filled the air.

I pushed my way to the market−place. Here about a dozen guns were parked, and at least a hundred horses tethered. At each corner a huge fire cracked and roared. The town hall was a blaze of light, and I heard from passersby that the mayor and council had been in session since noon. The current rumour was that the Stuart, with fifty thousand Highlanders, savages who disembowelled women for sport and roasted children for food, had sacked Manchester and was now marching south, with hell in his heart and desolation in his train. If one−hundredth of it were true, the worthy mayor had his work cut out, for the town was so ill−found that it would have fallen to a bombardment of turnips.

I took my stand on the town−hall steps to scan the scene and collect my thoughts. And here I had the best of luck, for who should come clanking down the steps but Jack Dobson. I had no need to envy him now, having better work on hand than his, but even if the mood of the midday had been prevailing, it would have disappeared before his hearty greeting.

“Noll, by gad, Noll,” he cried, wringing my hand joyously. “I am glad to see you, bully−boy; I thought you were sulking in your tent like—like, you know his name, the fellow old Bloggs was always yarning about.”

“Iphigenia,” said I.

“Was that the chap?” he said cheerily. “And now I've got you, come along to the house. I've more to tell you than there is in all your silly old Virgil, and it's alive, man, alive, alive. That's why it suits me. Come along, Noll. Lord Brocton's supping and staying with dad, so's Sneyd, and a lot more, and you'll hear all the news. Brocton's a beast, and I'm glad I'm an officer, if it's only a cornet in his rotten dragoons. There'll be one beast less in the world, I'm thinking, before long.”

“What's he done to upset you?”

“I say, Noll,” was his reply, “Kate did look sweet this afternoon. I was glad to have her come and see me off to the wars. I only had a few snatches of talk with her. Brocton was for ever finding me something to do, rot him, but she did look sweet.”

“All right, if she did. Never mind our Kate.”

“Never mind your Kate, you barbarian, you one−eyed anthropathingamy! Oh, Noll, old friend”—there was a catch in his voice as he dragged me into the entry at the side of old Comfit's shop,—“she's your Kate now, but if I come back, I want her to be my Kate. Don't breathe a word to her, Noll, unless I never come back,—war has its risks, Noll, and I'm going to take 'em all,—but if I never come back, Noll, just tell Kate that I loved her.”

A plump of townspeople yelled their way past the entry, and their torches lit up his fresh, boyish face, all alight with the enthusiasms of war and love. I clasped his hand, and we looked into each other's eyes.

“I'm glad to tell you, Noll.”

“I'm glad to hear it, Jack. Come back, for Kate's sake.”

The good fellow bubbled with joy at the meaning in my words, and we continued our way up the entry, intending a detour where we could talk in quiet, but before we had got out of the glare of the torches, he stopped me, looked searchingly at me and said, “Old Noll, there's more in your head now than Virgil.” This confirmed my suspicion that Master Jack Dobson was learning in his way more than I had learned in mine.

“Farming,” said I. “Tell me why Brocton is a beast.”

“He thinks every pretty woman a butterfly for his filthy fingers to crush the beauty out of. But if he rolls his beast's tongue round one name, either he or I will want that ferryman chap. What's his name?”

“Charon,” said I, forgetting to tease him.

“That's him, Charon, I'm sure you're right this time. I wasn't sure about the sulky old boy in the tent. I always thought Iphi−something was the one that got his throat—Abram and Isaac sort of tale without any ram and thicket at the end of it—but of course you'll be right.”

“And what sort of dragoons are you cornet of?” I asked.

“They give me the bats, Noll. There's about two hundred town−sweepings, not worth powder and shot, who

want tying on their horses, and hardly know butt from bayonet, and there's another two hundred better men, got together coming along, or in the country around Lichfield. Sneyd, a rattling good fellow, and I have tossed for stations, and when it comes to a battle he's to lead the yokels and I'm to follow behind, kicking the scum of London into the firing−line. Damn 'em. But I'll kick 'em right enough. Then there's Major Tixall—major, by gad—a slinking cut−throat, with a face the colour of pigs' liver. What he's majoring it for, Brocton and the devil alone know. The only good thing is we've got a first−rate drill sergeant. He's Brocton's toady, and for that I don't like him, but he does know his business, I must say that for him."

"Big−headed man, with a mouth slit up to his left ear?" said I, seizing the welcome opportunity.

"How the deuce do you know?" asked Jack, astonished.

"He came searching the Hanyards this afternoon for a Jacobite spy, a woman. But he didn't find her. She slipped through his fingers somehow. I understood from big−mouth that you'd caught her father. What have you done with him? Is he crow's meat yet?"

"No, for some reason or other, which is a mystery to me, Brocton sent him on with the van."

"Here?"

"No, farther on. Their orders are to push into Stone to−day, and Newcastle to−morrow. They ought to be in touch with the enemy there. Of course it's not certain which way they'll come, and if they come this way, Noll, mark you, we've made a mistake. We ought to have waited for 'em at Milford. We could have blown 'em to bits from the top of the hills, long before they could have got at us."

Our talk had brought us to an alley containing a side entrance to Master Dobson's fine, old, timbered house, the pride of the town and known there as the "Ancient High House." It stood on the main street of the town, which led from the bridge to the market−place. For a moment I was undecided, since I had obtained the news that mattered most, but I had only been out a short time, the rabbit−stew would not be ready, Mistress Waynflete was safe and comfortable, and might prefer to be alone, it was possible that I might learn something further—and on these grounds I decided that it would be well worth while to accept Jack's invitation. I therefore followed him into the withdrawing−room. Here I paid due courtesies to buxom Mistress Dobson and Mistress Priscilla Dobson, Jack's oldest sister, a wasp−waisted bundle of formalities, for ever curtsying and coquetting, after the London mode as she fondly imagined. My back fairly ached with answering bobs and bows before we had drunk our part of a dish of tea, which Mistress Dobson had brewed wherewith to refresh herself after the toils of hospitality, but at last I jerked my way out at Jack's heels, and we climbed to the stately barrel−roofed room where the great ones were assembled.

Horseshoe−wise round a mighty fire of logs, with a small table covered with decanters and glasses between each pair, some dozen men sat at their wine. There was, of course, Master Dobson, his meagre body all a twitter with importance, sitting in the centre of the bend, opposite the fire, whence he could survey all his guests at once, and urge them on with their carousing.

"My son returneth, my lord," he said, "with news from the worshipful the Mayor, and he hath brought with him a worthy yeoman, one Master Wheatman, who—"

"Of the Hanyards, Esquire," said I in a testy whisper.

"Ha, yes," he corrected and compromised, "Master Wheatman of the Hanyards, a loyal subject of His Gracious Majesty."

"The best friend and hardest hitter in broad Staffordshire," added Jack heartily.

I stepped into the horseshoe and made a bow general to the company, and a lower one for the benefit of my Lord Brocton, who sat next to the hearth in pride of place and comfort. Some years older than I, but not yet thirty, handsome as a god carved by Phidias, but with drink and devilment already marking him out for a damned soul, he sat there, the idol of that lord−worshipping company. The only vacant chair was on his left. It was Jack's place, earned by his father's guineas, which had remained vacant during his absence. The good lad, I record it with pride, notwithstanding a forbidding glance from his father, motioned me towards it, and fetched a glass and poured out wine for me. As I was stepping forward his lordship was good enough to address me.

"Ha, Master Wheatman of the Hanyards,"—there was a sneer in his voice, —"it is well I see thee on the right side, or, by gad and His Gracious Majesty, we'd have that other five hundred acres of yours." He tossed off a bumper of wine and added, "Or a solatium, Master Wheatman, a solatium."

I caught Jack's eye as I stepped right into the middle of the group. To my astonishment it was glowing with

anger. Did he not think I could take care of myself? Really Jack was becoming mysterious, but I supposed that as I was Kate's brother he was feeling unusually interested in my welfare. For my own part I was quite comfortable, and I replied easily, “As a matter of fact, my lord, I have chosen my side expressly on account of the well−known propensities of your lordship's family.”

For a full minute nothing was heard in the room but the cracking and sputtering of the fire. This was not because of what I had said, though no one present, and he least of all, could be fool enough to misunderstand it, but because of its effect on him. Then, as now, blood flowed like water on far lighter occasions than this, and Brocton, with all his faults, was a ready fighter. For once, however, his fingers did not seek his sword hilt, but fumbled with his empty glass, and his face went white as the ashes at his feet. At length he recovered himself somewhat.

“The loyal propensities of my family are well known to all men,” he said.

“And its determination to profit by them,” I retorted coldly, and plumped me down at his side.

Right opposite me was the rector, a gross, sack−faced, ignorant jolt−head, jowled like a pig and dew−lapped like an ox. Nature had meant him for a butcher, but, being a by−blow of a great house, a discerning patron had diverted him bishopward. In a voice husky with feeling and wine, he said, “Surely it is the part of a gracious king to reward such faithful service as that of the noble Earl of Ridgeley and my Lord Brocton.”

“Decidedly, your reverence,” I answered briskly, “and of others too, and if, as seems likely, the Highlanders have left a vacant deanery or two behind them, I hope your loyal services and pastoral life will be suitably rewarded with one.”

Here Jack drew up another chair and I moved to make more room, so that he could sit next to Brocton, to whom he was soon detailing in eager whispers the result of his visit to the town hall. The others took up the broken links of talk, and this gave me an opportunity of inspecting the company.

There could be no doubt about the man on my left. His vicious, pimply face manifested him Major Tixall, and Mistress Margaret's shudder was easily accounted for. He turned his shoulder to me and talked to another officer, who, so far, was only in his apprenticeship at the same game. Beyond were two other officers of a wholly different stamp, and the one who smiled at me with his eyes I took to be Sir Ralph Sneyd, a young Staffordshire baronet of high repute. Then came Master Dobson, separating the military sheep from the civilian goats. There was the Friday−faced clothier and mercer, Master Allwood, strange company here since he was the elder of a dissenting congregation in the town, and therefore well separated from his reverence. The worthy mercer's dissent did not extend, so rumour had it, to the making of hard bargains, and doubtless he was for once hob−nobbing with the great in respect of his long purse rather than of his long prayers. Other townsmen, whose names I did not know or cannot recall, separated deacon from rector.

The last man in the company, sitting opposite to his lordship, was a stranger, and by far the man best worth looking at in the room. He had drawn back a little, either out of the heat of the fire or to avoid his reverence's vinous gossip as much as possible. Except that he was certainly neither soldier nor parson, and probably not a lawyer, I could make nothing of him. He had a massive head and a resolute and intelligent face. He wore no wig and his hair was grey and closely cropped. I judged him to be a man nearing sixty, but he appeared strong and vigorous. He was dressed with rich unostentation, in grey jacket and breeches, with a lighter grey, silver−buttoned waistcoat, and stockings to match.

There was only one thing to be talked about in any company in Stafford that night. What was going to happen? What of truth and substance was there in the rumours that filled all mouths? At Master Dobson's two currents of opinion ran violently in opposite directions. The soldiers on my left were of course certain that the Stuart Prince and his Highland rabble would be driven back. The towns−people opposite were equally impressed with the fact that so far he had not been driven back but had carried all before him.

Sir Ralph had been stoutly maintaining that the rebellion was hopeless. “There's no getting away from it, Sir Ralph,” squeaked Master Dobson, summing up for the doubtful townsmen; “between the rebels and us this night there's not thirty miles nor three hundred men, and you've so far only got about two thousand men in Stafford. I'm as loyal a man as any in England, but there's no getting away from that.”

“Nobody wants to get away from it, Master Dobson,” replied Sir Ralph. “Any body of men with arms in their hands and the knack of using them, can march much farther than the Highlanders have come, if no other body of armed men stands in their way. The Stuart Prince's march will come to an end just as soon as he is opposed, and

we're here to oppose him."

Master Dobson was still gloomy. "What sort of men have you got? Raw militia lads, young recruits, and newly raised dragoons form at least half of your force in Stafford."

"Agreed," said Sir Ralph, "but we're rapidly licking 'em into shape, and the Duke will be after us to−morrow with the regulars."

"My good Sir Ralph," put in the mercer, "fifty thousand savage Highlanders will cut through Stafford as easily as if it were a Cheshire cheese. I fear the worst."

"My worthy sir," said his lordship, and in his dulcet tones I heard the tinkle of the mercer's guineas, "you need fear nothing. Neither stick nor stone in Stafford will be disturbed. We are at least strong enough to make good terms."

"And Mistress Allwood," said the rector with a leer, "will be spared the wastage of her charms on a ragged Highlander."

The mercer's wife had all the charms of a withered apple, but here was opening for discord, and our twittering host staved it off by appealing to the stranger: "What do you think, Master Freake, of the way things are going?"

"I have not formed an opinion as to what is likely to happen here, good Master Dobson," he replied, "but, speaking generally, I should feel much easier in mind if the Duke's horses were not so utterly worn out."

There was a distinct note of patronage in the tone in which this shrewd and sensible remark was uttered, nor was this affected, I thought, but rather the natural manner of a strong man speaking to a weak one.

"Egad, you're right there, sir," cried Jack. "Nineteen out of twenty of them couldn't be flayed into doing another five miles. I was over an hour getting them from Milford, under five miles."

"The Highlanders would march it in less," replied Master Freake, "and this is not a campaign, but a race."

"Where to?" It was Brocton who spoke.

"London," was the prompt reply. "That's the heart of England, my lord, and if Prince Charles gets into the heart he need not be concerned over Wade marking time in the heels or the Duke sprawling about in its belly."

"Your speech is light, Master Freake," said the rector with drunken sense and gravity. "I trust it savoureth not of treasonable hopes."

I turned during this absurd remark to glance at Brocton to see what effect this excellent summary of the situation had had on him. To my surprise I caught him looking so meaningly at the pimple−faced Major, that I felt sure something was going to happen, and I was right.

"God rot the man," said the Major thickly. "Does he say that I'm sprawling about in somebody's belly?" He staggered to his feet, hand on sword, and made to cross to the stranger, shouting, "Damnation to you, I'll thrust something into your belly!"

Brocton, not in the least to my surprise, made no attempt to interfere. Jack couldn't, for I was in the way. His father began to splutter helplessly. I shot out my foot, and swept the Major heavily to the floor. I plucked him up by his collar as if he were a rabbit, and choked him till his face was nearly black. Then I put him back in his chair, where he sat huddled up and gasping.

"Sir," said I to him, with much politeness, "you are tired by the exertions of the evening. But I like a man who sticks up for his commander, and desire to have the honour of drinking your health." And I toasted him complacently, smiling the while into his little pig's eyes.

This terminated the trouble, which Master Freake had watched with quiet amusement. For my own part I was now anxious to go, for I was learning nothing. Accident favoured me, for a servant came in and whispered something to Brocton which took him out of the room. I seized the opportunity to follow, declining to allow Jack to accompany me, and wishing him good−bye and good luck. "Remember about Kate," were his last words, whispered eagerly as he loosed my hand and opened me the door.

Several rooms opened on the landing, and I noticed that one door was ajar. As I passed the slit of light I caught sight of the sergeant of dragoons, and stopped beyond the door to listen. I heard Brocton's voice, and caught the words, "Egad, I'll e'en try her. Take the best horse available. There's no danger, but speed is everything." He dropped his voice to a whisper and for a moment or two I caught nothing. Then, raising his voice again, he said, "And now for your prize." I heard him move to go, and darted ahead, silent as a bat in a barn, and a moment later was in the noisy street. There was nothing to keep me now, and a few minutes later I quietly lifted Marry−me−quick's latch, stepped into the room, and observed at once that Mistress Waynflete's look imported

news.

“Now, little mother,” said I to Mistress Tonks, “supper's the blessedest word I know.”

“And the rabbit−stew's as good as done by now,” she said, and went into the back room to dish it up.

“The man with the slit face has been,” said Mistress Waynflete composedly. “He came hunting for quarters, but Mistress Tonks frightened him off. At any rate, he soon left.”

“Did he recognize you as 'Moll' of the Hanyards?”

“I'm quite sure that he did not. I turned my back the moment he entered, and my hood was up. Moreover, I did not speak a word. Mother Tonks said that I was staying here for the night because my father's house was full of soldiers. She couldn't and wouldn't, she said, have a soldier here for all the worshipful mayors in England. I was quite amused at the way she talked him back to the door and through it.”

The little woman bustled in to lay the supper things. She was bubbling over with elation. “It'll be another ten or fifteen minutes, will the rabbit−stew. The lady will have told you about ugly mug, Master Oliver. I got him out in no time. His head was all mouth like a cod−fish. I'll soon be back. I expect you're both hungry.”

Off she bustled again, and we again settled down to our talk. I was anxious to see if she could throw any light on Brocton's dealing with her father. His conduct was to me wholly inexplicable. Then, too, there was his obvious understanding with Major Tixall in the matter of the latter's attack on Master Freake. Who was this stranger and why had he incurred Brocton's enmity? Here was a whole string of puzzles awaiting solution. But before I could start the conversation we were again interrupted. The latch clicked, the door opened, and in walked my Lord Brocton.

CHAPTER VI. MY LORD BROCTON

I was as new to a life of action as an hour−old duckling is to water, and this ironical upset of all my plans left me helpless. The very last man whom I wanted to see Mistress Waynflete was here, his plumed hat sweeping to the floor, triumph on his handsome face and in his easy, languid tones. Indeed, more astonishing than his being here, was his manner and bearing. At Master Dobson's, a natural remark of mine had beaten all his wits out of him. Here his assurance was such that it puzzled me out of action.

“My sergeant, madam,” he began, “no mean judge, since he has seen the reigning beauties of half the capitals of Europe, told me to expect a prize, but it is the prize. Master Wheatman, you are not, I am told, as good a judge of cattle as Turnip Townshend, but you are, let me tell you, a better one of women. I understand you know. Both acres and solatium shall be mine in any event. And, dear Margaret, though I do not understand what your haughtiness is doing here alone with my farmer friend, I need hardly say that your devoted servant greets you with all humility.”

Again his hat curved in mockery through the air. He replaced it on his head, drew his rapier, with quick turns of his wrist swished the supple blade through the air till it sang, then flashed it out at me like the tongue of an adder, and said, “Sit you still, Farmer Wheatman, sit you still. Move but your hand and I spit you like a lark on a skewer. So, little man, so!”

The contempt in his words stirred the gall in my liver, but I neither spoke nor shifted, and he continued, addressing her, but with cold, amused eyes fixed on me, “You see, sweet Margaret, how yokel blood means yokel mood. Your turnip−knight freezes at the sight of steel.”

In part at least he spoke truth. I had rarely seen a naked sword, other than our time−worn and useless relic of the doughty Smite−and−spare−not, and had never sat thus at the point of one drawn in earnest on myself. It is easy to blame me, and at the back of my own mind I was blaming and cursing myself, as I sat helpless there. I was keen as the blade he bore to help her, for here was her hour of uttermost need, but I did not see that I should be capable of much service with a hole in my heart, and he had me at his mercy beyond a doubt, so long as he had me in his eye. No, galling as it was, there was nothing to do but to wait the turn of events. Something might divert his attention. One second was all I wanted, and I sat there praying for it and ready for it. Meanwhile the scene, the talk, and she were full of interest.

Marry−me−quick's cottage was no hovel, either for size or appointments. Brocton was standing with his back to a dresser. On his left was the outer door, and on his right, between him and Mistress Waynflete, the door in the party wall leading to the back room where the rabbit−stew was now being dished up. Madam and I sat on opposite sides of the large hearth, a small round table, drawn close to the fire for comfort and covered with the supper things, occupied part of the space between us, but there was plenty of room for action. When Brocton had stretched out his rapier towards me in threat and command, the point was perhaps three feet from my breast, and he could master my slightest movement.

And Mistress Waynflete. At the bridge in the afternoon I had noticed that while danger for her father had stirred her heart to its dearest depth, danger for herself troubled her not one whit. When I looked at her now there was no fear in her face, which was calm as the face of a pictured saint, but I saw questionings there and knew they were of me. Plainly as if she spoke the words, her great blue eyes were saying, “Am I leaning on a broken reed?” As she caught my look she turned to Brocton, and I gritted my teeth and listened.

“So your lordship has found me!” She spoke easily and lightly. “How small the world must be since it cannot find room for me to avoid you!”

“Say rather, dear mistress, that my love draws me unerringly towards you.”

“I thought I gathered that there was another motive for your coming here to−night.”

“Margaret, believe me, I am distraught,” he said, not wholly in mockery it seemed to me.

“So distraught, it seems, that you neglect your plainest duty as an officer in order to corrupt, if you can, a supposed country maiden, of whom you have heard by chance. His Grace of Cumberland will be glad to hear of such devotion.”

“Won't you listen to me, Margaret? You know I love you.”

"If you were offering me, my lord, the only kind of love which an honourable man can offer, I should still refuse it. Your reputation, character, and person are all equally disagreeable to me, and that you should imagine that there is even the smallest chance of your succeeding, is an insult for which, were I a man, you should pay dearly."

"On the contrary, dear Margaret," he replied, in his most silken tones, plainly shifting to more favourable ground, "I fancy that the chance is by no means small."

"Your fancy does not interest me," was the cold reply.

"Every woman has her price, if I may adapt a phrase of the late Sir Robert's, and I can pay yours. Excuse my frankness, Margaret. It would be unpardonable if we were not alone. Yon cattle−drover hardly counts as audience, I fancy, for he is already as good as strung up as a rebel."

After a long silence, so long that I tried to find an explanation of it, she said, "You refer to my father?" There was a quaver in her voice which all her bravery could not suppress.

"Exactly, Margaret, to your dear father."

"In times like this, no doubt, your conduct in arresting him will pass for legal, but fortunately some evidence will be required, and you have none. The fact is that in your loyal zeal you have acted too soon."

"I thought your daughterly instincts would be aroused," he answered, scoffing openly as he saw his advantage. "They have lain dormant longer than I expected. Believe me, Margaret, for my own purposes I have acted in the very nick of time, and you will do well to drop your unfounded hopes of the future. Your father's fate is certain if I act, for I can call a witness—you remember Major Tixall, a beery but insinuating person—whose evidence is enough to hang him fifty times over. Whether or not I produce it depends, as I say, on the depth of your affection for him."

"I shall know how to save my father, my lord, when the time comes. Now, perhaps, having played your last card, you will leave me."

"My dear Margaret," was the cool reply, "your innocence amazes me. My last card! Not at all, sweet queen. You are my last card."

"I? How so?"

"You, too, are a rebel, if I choose to say the word, and a dangerous one to boot. So here's your choice: come where love awaits you or go where the gallows awaits you."

"And if I could so far forget my nature as to come where love of your sort, the love of a mere brute beast, awaits me, you would forget everything?"

"Everything, Margaret."

"Your duty to your King included?"

"Certainly. There's nothing I will not do, or leave undone, at your behest for your fair sake."

"You flatter me, my lord, far above my poor deserts. And now, if your lordship will excuse me,"—she arose at the words, pale and determined as death,—"I will e'en go and give myself up to some responsible officer and acquaint him with your conduct."

"He would not believe you, my sweet Margaret."

"You forget I have a witness, my lord." For the first time during the conversation she looked across at me.

"He would not be there to witness, Margaret. Surely you suppose that I am wise enough to prevent that move. Keep on sitting still, Farmer Oliver. I'm glad, believe me, to see you so interested. A difficult piece of virtue she is, to be sure, and if you could only escape a hanging, which you will not, you might have learned to−night a useful lesson in the art of managing a woman. It's an art, sir, a great, a curious art, and I flatter myself I am somewhat of a master therein."

All this time he had kept me in his eye, and the point of his rapier was ready for my slightest move. It had grieved me to the heart to hear him shame this noble woman so, bargaining for her honour as lightly as a marketing housewife chaffers for a pullet. How she had felt it, I could judge in part by the deathly paleness of her face, and the tight hold she was keeping on herself. She dropped into her chair again and buried her face in her hands. He only smiled as one who presages a welcome triumph. I kept still and silent, never moving my eyes from his, praying and waiting for my second.

She raised her head and spoke again: "If I did not know you, my lord, I would plead with you. Two men's lives are in my hands, you say, and there is"—she paused—"but one way"—another terrible pause—"of saving

them.”

“You want me to throw in the cattle−drover?” he asked gaily.

“Yes,” she replied, in a scarcely audible whisper.

“It's throwing in five hundred acres of land each of which my father values at a Jew's eye, let me tell you, but, egad, Margaret, you're not dear even at that. Run away home, Farmer Wheatman, and don't be fool enough to play the rebel again.”

I sat still and silent. Speech was useless, and action not yet possible. That keen swordsman's eye must be diverted somehow. There was a God in heaven, and the rabbit−stew would be ready soon. It was useless to attempt to force matters. And as for his taunts, well, he was but feathering my arrows. So I sat on like a stone.

“Go, Master Wheatman,” she urged faintly, but I did not even turn to look at her. My heart was thumping on my ribs, my nerves tingling, my muscles involuntarily tightening for a spring.

“These yokels are so dull and lifeless, Margaret. He cannot understand our impatience.” Out of the corner of my eye I saw her crimson to the roots of her hair at this vicious insult. “Off, my man,” he added to me, “or I'll prick your bull's hide.” He thrust out his rapier to give point to the threat. Nothing moved me. My eyes were glued to his.

And now the door on his right hand opened, and little Mistress Marry−me−quick appeared with our supper. She saw the sword directed at the breast of the one man on earth she loved with all the fervour of her honest, womanly heart. The sight scattered her senses. With a nerve−racking shriek she flopped heavily to the floor, and the rabbit−stew flew from her hands and crashed loudly at his feet. It was too much for his wine−sodden nerves. His eyes turned, his body slackened, the point of his rapier flagged floorward. God had given me my second.

I bounded at him, not straight, but somewhat to his left. He recovered, but, anticipating a straight rush, thrust clean out on the expected line of my leap. His blade ran through between my coat and waistcoat, and the guard thumped sore on my ribs. Then he was mine.

I struck hard on heart and belt and knocked the wind out of his body. He sucked for breath like a drowning man. Now he could not call for help, and I finished him off, quickly, gladly, and smilingly. His twitching fingers fumbled at his belt as if seeking a pistol. Finding none, he made no further attempt to defend himself, and covered his face with his arms to keep off my blows, but I struck him with such fierce strength on his unprotected temples that he weakened and dropped them. His ghastly, bleeding face turned upwards, his dazed eyes pleading for the mercy he had denied her a moment ago. It was brute appealing to brute in vain, and with one last blow on the chin that drove his teeth together like the crack of a pistol and nearly tore his head off his shoulders, I knocked him senseless to the floor.

His rapier hung in the skirt of my coat, so close had I been to sure and sudden death. I drew it out and tossed it to the floor at his side. “I wish, madam,” said I, reaching out for mother's domino, “that we could have saved the rabbit−stew.”

“Is he dead?” she whispered, with white lips, coming forward and looking shudderingly down on him with troubled eyes.

“No such luck,” said I. “He may be round in five minutes, but that's enough, though poor little Marry−me−quick will have to be left to fend for herself.” I helped her into the domino, pulled the hood over the wonderful hair, and seized my own hat.

“Now, Mistress Waynflete,” said I, “the northern halt of Staffordshire is before us, and the sooner some of it is behind us the better.” With these words I led her to the door, which I closed carefully behind me, and into the street.

A little explanation will make our subsequent movements clearer. The eastern side of Stafford is roughly bow−shaped. The main street is the straight string and the wood is the curve of the wall, now mostly fallen down and in ruins, the line of which was followed by the street we were in, and only some fifty yards from the southern end of the string. The marksman's thumb represents the market square, and the arrow the line of the east gate street.

No cat in the town knew it better than I did, or could travel it better in the dark. Indeed, our only danger now came from the moon, but, fortunately, she had not yet climbed very high. Mistress Waynflete placed her arm in mine and we turned to the right, away from the still noisy and crowded main street. We passed an ale−house bursting with customers, the central figure among whom, plainly visible from the street, was Pippin Pat, an

Irishman with so huge a head that he had become a celebrity under this name for miles around. He had made himself rolling drunk and, suitably to the occasion, had been made into a Highlander by the simple process of robbing him of his breeches and rubbing his head with ruddle. He was a sorry sight enough, but, the main thing, he had attracted an enormous company. I rejoiced to see him, for it meant that the wicket of his master's tanyard, half a stone's throw ahead, would be unbolted. This would save us a longish detour and lessen the danger of being observed.

Arrived at the tanyard gate, I tried the wicket. It was unbolted, as I had anticipated, and we were soon in the quiet and obscurity of the tanyard. The far side of the yard was separated by a low stone wall from the end of a blind alley leading into Eastgate Street. I guided my companion safely by the edges of the tan−pits, and on arriving at the wall, I made no apology but lifted her on to it. As she sat there a shaft of moonlight lit up her fine, brave face. I feasted my eyes upon it for a moment, and then made to leap over to assist her to the other side, but she stayed me with a hand on each shoulder.

“I will go no farther, Master Wheatman,” she said in a low, troubled voice, “till you forgive me.”

“Forgive you?” I cried, astounded. “Forgive you? What for?”

“For thinking meanly of you. I thought you were afraid of Brocton. Not until that lion leap of yours did I realize how cleverly and nobly you had sat there through his insults, foreseeing the exact moment when you could master him. My only explanation, I do not offer it as an excuse, is that the utter beast in Brocton makes it hard for me to think well of any man. Oh, believe me, I am ashamed, confounded, and miserable. Say you forgive me!”

“Madam,” I said laughingly, “the next time I play the knight−errant, may God send me a less observant damsel. There's nothing to forgive. The plain truth is that I was frightened, a little bit. But I'm new to this sort of thing, and I hope to improve.” Then, after a pause, I met her eyes full with mine and added, “As we go on.”

“Frightened,” she said scornfully, “you frightened, you who leaped unarmed on the best swordsman in London? No, don't mock me, Master Wheatman, forgive me.”

“Of course I do, and thank you for your kind words. And we've both got some one to forgive.”

She smiled radiantly—“Whom? And what for?”

I leaped over the wall, and put my arms around her to lift her down.

“Marry−me−quick, for dropping the rabbit−stew.”

CHAPTER VII. THE RESULTS OF LOSING MY VIRGIL

We slipped down the blind alley and came out in the street leading to the East Gate. There was still great plenty of people strolling up and down, for night had not yet killed off the novelty and excitement caused by the arrival of the army. The smaller houses were crowded with soldiery, hob−nobbing with the folk on whom they were billeted, and all were yelling out, “Let the cannakin clink!” and other rowdy ditties in the intervals of drinking. At the East Gate itself, a fire blazed, and pickets warmed themselves round it, while along the street late−coming baggage and ammunition wagons were trailing wearily. It was idle to expect to pass unseen, so we plunged into the throng, threaded through the wagons, and skirted leftward till we arrived at a quieter street running down to the line of the wall.

Here every brick and stone was as a familiar friend, for the little grammar school backed on to the wall at the very spot where the main street led through the old north gate of the town. Old Master Bloggs lived in a tiny house on the side of the school away from the gate. There were the candles flickering in the untidy den in which the old man passed all his waking hours out of school−time, and there, I doubted not, they would be guttering away if the Highlanders sacked the town. I led the way across the little fore−court, paled off from the street by wooden railings, gently opened the door, and walked in to the dark passage.

The study door was ajar, and we peeped in. There the old, familiar figure was, eyesight feebler, shoulders rounder, hair whiter, and clothing shabbier than of yore, crumpled over a massive folio. He was reading aloud, in a monotonous, squeaky half−pitch. Latin hexameters they were, for even his voice could not hide all the music in them, and as I listened it became clear that the old man had that night been moved to select something appropriate to the occasion, for he was going through the account of the fall of Troy in the second Aeneid.

I put my fingers on my lips and crept on, followed by Mistress Waynflete. In the little back room I whispered, “My old school and schoolmaster. We will not disturb the old man. Poor little Marry−me−quick may have to suffer on our account, and old Bloggs shall at any rate have the excuse of knowing nothing about us. He's happy enough over the fall of Troy. Nothing that he can do can help us. Let him be.”

She nodded assent and I looked round. Opening a cupboard, I found half a loaf of bread, a nipperkin of milk, and a rind of cheese. “Eat,” said I, “and think it's rabbit−stew.” I made her take all the milk, but shared the bread and cheese. Troy went on falling steadily meanwhile, and when we had finished our scanty nuncheon I once more led the way, and we passed out into the little yard behind the schoolhouse, and gained the playground, the outer boundary of which was the town wall, here some twelve feet high and in a fair state of preservation. Many generations of schoolboys had cut and worn a series of big notches on each side of the wall, and by long practice I could run up and down in a trice to fetch ball or tipcat which had been knocked over.

From the bridge at the Hanyards onwards, Mistress Waynflete had always acted promptly and exactly to my wish. I felt a boor, and was in truth a boor, in comparison with her. Brocton's 'yokel blood' gibe had put murder into my blows, but it had truth enough in it to make it rankle like a poisoned arrow. Yet here was this wonder−woman, trustful as a child and meeker than a milkmaid. My work was new, but at any rate I had sometimes dreamed that I could do a man's work when I got my chance, and I had limbs of leather and steel to do it with. My thoughts, however, were newer still, and had no background of daydreams to stand against. Moreover, things had gone with such a rush that I had had no time to shake and sift them into order. At the foot of that wall all I knew, and that but dimly, was that there were thoughts that made a man's work the one thing worth living for.

“Get your breath, madam,” said I. “You want it all now, and there's no need to hurry.”

She leaned easily against the wall, and peered round to make out her surroundings. The only result could be to give her the impression that she was cooped up like a rat in a trap, but with characteristic indifference for herself, she only said:

“And this was your school?”

“For many years, seven or more.”

She was silent for a time and then went on.

“You have led a quiet life, Master Wheatman?”

“Ha,” thought I, “she's gauging my capacity to help her,” and added aloud, bitterly reminiscent, “The life of a

yokel, madam."

"You have read much?"

"Yes, I'm fond of reading. It passes the long winter nights."

"And no doubt you know by heart the merry gests of Robin Hood and the admirable exploits of Claude Duval?"

I felt her eyes on me in the dark, and longed for the sun so that I could see the blue glint in them.

"No such rubbish, indeed," said I hotly. It was a slight on Master Bloggs, droning away yonder at the fall of Troy, not to say the sweet old vicar.

"What then?"

"Livy and Caesar, and stuff like that, but mainly Virgil."

"Then it's very, very curious," she whispered emphatically.

No doubt yokel blood ought not to run like wine under the mighty pulse of Virgil, and I sourly asked, "What's curious, madam? Old Bloggs has nothing to teach except Latin, and I happened to take to it. Why curious?"

"Really, Master Wheatman, not curious? Here we are in a narrow yard at the foot of a high wall. I'm perfectly certain that within five minutes I shall be whisked over to the other side. And you got that out of Virgil?"

"Straight out of Virgil, madam. Stafford was our Troy, and this the wall thereof. I've got in and out thousands of times."

She peered comically around the dark playground and said gaily, "I see no wooden horse. There should be one, I know. Master Dryden says so, and he knows all about Virgil."

"Poof," said I. "If old Bloggs heard you, he'd tingle to thrash you black and blue."

"He couldn't now I've got my breath again," she laughed.

"I'm glad of that. Let me explain. Here is a ladder of notches in the wall, left and right alternately. Feel for them." She did so, and I went on: "They are roughly three feet apart on each side. I'll climb up first and assist you up the last few. Your skirts will trouble you, I fear."

"Not much, for I'll turn them up." She promptly did so, and fastened the edges round her waist. She also discarded the long, cumbrous domino, and I took it from her.

"Watch me," said I, "and follow when I give the word. I'll have a look round first."

Up I went, hand over hand, as easily as ever I had done it. I crouched down on the top of the wall, which, fortunately, lay in the shadow of the schoolhouse. I saw in the sky the reflected glare of a fire at the north gate, another picket I supposed, but there were houses without the gate, and these were dark and silent. There was no fear of our being observed.

"Come!" I whispered.

She started boldly and came up with cheering swiftness. I spread the domino in readiness, then stretched down to help her, and in another moment she was sitting the wall as a saddle.

"Splendid, for a novice," I said.

"And a novice in skirts, short ones."

She went first down the other side, and I nearly pitched headlong in assisting her as far down as possible. She lowered her skirts while I followed and then I helped her into the domino, rejoicing in the silken caress of her hair on my hands as I arranged the hood, a pleasant piece of officiousness for which I got thanks I did not deserve, and off we started.

Again she asked nothing as to what we were going to do and whither we were bound. The blazing windows of a comfortable inn might have been in sight for aught she cared to all outward seeming. Yet here she was, close on midnight, in bitterly cold weather, stepping out into rough and unknown country in company with a man she had only known a few hours.

I went ahead and thought it over. For ten minutes we picked our way in the deep shadow along the foot of the wall, *per opaca locorum*, as the great weaver of words puts it, and then I turned outwards into the open field and the clear moonlight. Of her own accord she placed her arm in mine, and we stepped it out bravely together.

"We are in unenclosed land here," I explained. "On our right is a patch which varies between bog and marsh and pool, according to the rains. The townsmen call it the King's Pool, whatever state it is in. Just ahead, you can see the line of it, is a little stream, the Pearl Brook. If it isn't frozen over yet, I can easily carry you across, as it's not more than six inches deep. The freemen of the Ancient Borough—yon little town has slumbered there nearly

eight hundred years—have, by immemorial custom, the right of fishing in the Pearl Brook with line and bent pin."

"They do not catch many thirty−pound jack, I suppose?"

"Dear me, no. But it was here I learned to like fishing, and I went on from minnows and jacksharps to pike."

"And wandering damsels," she interrupted, with a laugh that sounded to me like the music of silver bells. A minute later, on the edge of the brook, she said vexedly, "And it's not frozen over." But I had already noticed that fact with great elation.

"Not more than six inches, you say," she muttered, and made to step in.

"And if it were not so much as six barley−corns," I said, "I would not suffer you to wade it. What am I for, pray you, madam?"

Without more ado, I lifted her once more in my arms—the fourth time that day—and started. I cursed the narrowness of the Pearl Brook. I could almost have hopped across it, but by dawdling aslant the stream I had her sweet face near mine in the moonlight, and my arms round her proud body, for a couple of minutes. "Yokel blood or not," I thought, "this is something my Lord Brocton will never do."

A quarter of an hour later, after helping her up a short, steep scarp, we stood and looked back on the little town. Its roofs were bathed in moonlight, and the great church tower stood out in grey against the blue−black sky. Patches of dull, ruddy glow in the sky marked the sites of the picket−fires, and there came to us, like the gibbering of ghosts in the wind, the dying notes of the day's excitement. To our left, bits of silver ribbon marked the twistings of the river, and that darker line in the distant darkness was the hills of my home and boyhood. At their feet was the Hanyards, and Kate and mother. There was a little mist in my eyes, and the eyes I turned and looked into were brimming with tears.

"And now, Mistress Waynflete," said I, "let us on to our inn."

"Our inn!" she echoed, and there was dismay in her voice. "Our inn, and I haven't a pennypiece. For safety, I put my hat, my riding jacket, and my purse under the bed at Marry−me−quick's, and the fight and hurry drove them out of my mind completely."

"And I'm in the same case exactly," said I, and laughed outright. I had little use for money at the Hanyards, least of all in the pockets of my Sunday best, and not until she told me her plight did I realize the fact that in the elation of starting from home, I had forgotten that money might be necessary. Though I laughed, I watched her closely. Now she would break down. No woman's heart could stand the shock.

"My possessions," she said, "are precisely two handkerchiefs, one of Madame du Pont's washballs, and most of a piece of the famous marry−me−quick."

I had been mistaken. She made no ado about our serious situation, but spoke with a grave humour that fetched me greatly.

"Quite a lengthy inventory," I replied. "My contributions to the common stock are—" and I fumbled in my pockets—"item, one handkerchief; item, a pocket−knife; item, one pipe and half a paper of tobacco; item, one flask, two−thirds full of Mistress Kate Wheatman's priceless peppermint cordial, the sovereign remedy against fatigue, cold, care, and the humours; item, something unknown which has been flopping against my hip and is, by the outward feel of it, a thing to rejoice over, to wit, one of Kate's pasties."

I pushed my hand down for it, and then laughed louder than ever, as I drew forth my dumpy little Virgil.

"Item," I concluded, "the works of the divine master, P. Vergilius Maro, hidden in my pocket by that mischievous minx and monkey, Kate Wheatman of the Hanyards." And I told the story.

"Then if Kate had not hidden your beloved Virgil, you would not have gone fishing?"

"I'm sure I shouldn't."

"Life turns on trifles, Master Wheatman, and to a pretty girl's sisterly jest I owe everything that has happened since I first saw you on the river bank."

"We owe it, madam," I corrected gently, and I turned to go on, for I saw that she was moved and troubled at the evil she thought she had brought on me. Evil! I was enjoying every breath I drew and every step I took, and my heart was like a live coal in the midst of my bosom.

"Have no fear, Mistress Margaret," said I cheerfully, sweeping my hand out. "There's broad Staffordshire before us, a goodly land full of meat and malt and money, and we'll have our share of it."

"But you'll have to steal it for me."

"'Convey the wise it call," "I quoted.

“That's better,” and she smiled up at me in the moonlight. “Virgil puts you right above my poor wits, but say you love Shakespeare too, and we shall have one of the great things of life in common.”

“I do, madam, but you must learn to rate things at their true value. You speak French?”

“Oh yes.”

“And Italian?”

“Yes.”

“And play the harpsichord?”

“Yes.”

“Then, madam, I am a half−educated boor compared with you, for I know none of these things. But though I do not know the French or Italian for marry−me−quick, if you will get it out of your pocket, I'll show you the Staffordshire for half of it.”

We marched on gaily for another quarter of an hour, eating the sweet morsel. Then I said, “Even an old traveller and campaigner like you will be glad to learn that our inn is at hand.”

“Very glad, but I see no signs of it.”

“Well, no,” said I, “it's not exactly an inn, but just a plain barn. You shall sleep soft and safe and warm, though, and even if we had money and an inn was at hand, it would be foolish to go there. Your case is hard, madam, and I wish I could offer you better quarters.”

Under the shelter of a round knoll clumped with pines, lay an ancient farmhouse. We were approaching it from the front, and its sheds and barns were at the rear. We therefore turned into the field and fetched a circuit, and soon stood at the gate leading into the farmyard. No one stirred, not even a dog barked, as I softly opened the gate and crept, followed by Mistress Waynflete, to the nearest building. I pushed open the door, we entered a barn, and were safe for the night. The moon shone through the open door, and I saw that the barn was empty, probably because the year's crops, as I knew to my sorrow, had been poor indeed in our district. The fact that the barn was bare told in our favour, as no farm hand would be likely to come near it should one be stirring before us next morning.

A rick stood handy in the yard, and on going to it I found that three or four dasses of hay had been carved out ready for removal to the stalls. I carried them to the shed, one by one, and mighty hot I was by the time I dumped the last on the barn floor. Starting off again, I poached around in another shed, and was lucky enough to find a pile of empty corn sacks. Spreading these three or four deep in the far corner of the barn, I covered them thickly with hay, and having reserved a sack on purpose, I stuffed it loosely with hay to serve for a pillow.

All this busy time Mistress Waynflete stood on the moonlit door−sill, silent as a mouse, and when I stole quietly up to tell her all was ready, I saw that her hands were clasped in front and her lips moved. I bared my head and waited, for she had transformed this poor barn into a maiden's sanctuary.

She turned her face towards me. “Madam,” said I, very quietly, “your bed is ready, and you are tired out and dead for sleep. Pray come!”

Still silent, she stepped up and examined my rude handiwork. Then she curled herself up on the hay, and I covered her with more hay till she lay snug enough to keep out another Great Frost.

“Good night, madam, and sweet sleep befall you,” and I was turning away.

“Ho!” she said, “and pray where do you propose to sleep?”

“I shall nest under the rick−straddle.”

“Sir,” and her tone was almost unpleasant, “for the modesty you attribute unto me, I thank you. For the gratitude you decline to attribute unto me, I dislike you. But pray give me credit for a little common sense. I shall desire your services in the morning, and I do not want to find you under a rick, frozen to a fossil.”

“No, madam.”

She sprang out of bed, tumbling the hay in all directions.

“Master Wheatman, I will not pretend to misunderstand you, and indeed, I thank you, but you are going to put your bed here,” stamping her foot, “so that we can talk without raising our voices. I am much more willing to sleep in the same barn with you than in the same town with my Lord Brocton. Where's your share of the sacks?”

I did without sacks, but I fetched more chunks of hay, and she helped me strew a bed for myself close up to her own. I tucked her up once more, and then made myself cosy. I was miserable lest I should snore. Yokels so often do. Joe Braggs, for instance, would snore till the barn door rattled.

I remembered the cordial, and we each had a good pull at the flask. I felt for days the touch of her smooth, soft fingers on mine as she took it.

"It certainly does warm you up," she said. "I feel all aglow without and within."

"Then I may take it that you are comfortable?"

"If it were not for two things, I should say this was a boy−and−girl escapade of ours, every moment of which was just pure enjoyment."

"Naturally you are uneasy about your father, but I cannot think he will come to any immediate harm. Why Brocton should send him north instead of south is, I confess, a mystery, but to−morrow will solve it. And what else makes you uneasy?"

"You," she replied, very low and brief.

"I? And pray, madam, what have I done to make you uneasy?"

"Met me." Still the same tone.

"I am not able to talk to you in the modish manner, nor do I think you would wish me to try to ape my betters, so I say plainly that our meeting has not made me uneasy. Why then you?"

"Had you not met me, you would now be asleep at the Hanyards, a free and happy country gentleman. Instead you are here, a suspect, a refugee, an outlaw, one tainted with rebellion, the jail for certain if you are caught, and then—"

She broke off abruptly, and I think I heard a low sob.

"And then?"

"Perhaps the gibbet."

"It's true that the thieving craft is a curst craft for the gallows, but to−morrow's trouble is like yesterday's dinner, not worth thinking on. We are here, safe and comfortable. Let that suffice. And to−day, so far from doing harm at which you must needs be uneasy, you have wrought a miracle."

"Wrought a miracle? What do you mean?"

"You have found a cabbage, and made a man. Good night, Mistress Waynflete."

"Good night, Master Wheatman."

I imitated the regular breathing of a tired, sleeping man. In a few minutes it became clear that she was really asleep, and I pretended no longer, but stretched out comfortably in the fragrant hay and soon slept like a log.

CHAPTER VIII. THE CONJURER'S CAP

I awoke between darkness and daylight. Mistress Waynflete still slept peacefully and there was as yet no need to rouse her. I had slept in my shoes, but now, I drew them off, lifted the bar of the door, and stole out to look around. Not a soul was stirring about the farm, and the only living creature in sight was a sleepy cock, which scuttled off noisily at my approach. I entered a cowshed, where a fine, patient cow turned a reproachful eye on me, as if rebuking me for my too early visit. I cheerily clucked and slapped her on to her hoofs, and then, failing to find any sort of cup or can, punched my hat inside out and filled it with warm foaming milk. With this spoil I hurried back to our quarters.

I had to leave the door open, and this gave me light enough to look more closely at my companion. She was still sleeping, her face calmly content, and so had she slept through the night, for the coverlet of hay was rising and falling undisturbed on her breast. It was now time to wake her, and, having no free hand, I knelt down to nudge her with my elbow. As I did so, her face changed. A look of concern came over it, then one of hesitation, then a sweet smile, chasing each other as gleam chases gloom across the meadows on an April day. She was dreaming, dreaming pleasantly, and it was to a hard world that I awakened her.

At my second nudge she half−opened her eyes and murmured, “It's very wide.” Then my greeting aroused her fully, and she blushed wondrous red and beautiful.

“Good morrow, Mistress Waynflete,” said I. “I grieve to disturb you, and, pray you, do not move too abruptly or over goes the breakfast.”

“Good morrow, Master Oliver,” she replied. “I have slept well. I feel as if I've quite enjoyed it. We do enjoy sleep, I think, sometimes.”

“Or the dreams it brings, madam.”

She glanced quickly at me, as if afraid that I had the power of reading dream−thoughts, and gaily said, “And breakfast ready! This is even better than the Paris fashion. What is it? More of dear Kate's cordial?”

I did not know what the Paris fashion of breakfast was, and she did not enlighten me. Anyhow, I, the yokel, had improved on it, and that was something.

“A far better brewage, madam,” I said, “but you must pardon the Staffordshire fashion of serving it.”

She sat up, took the cap, and drank heartily, the dawn still in her eyes and cheeks, and masses of yellow hair tumbling down from under her hood on throat and bosom. When she handed back the cap, I could not forbear from saying, “You look charming after your night's rest, and I profess that tear of milk on the tip of your nose becomes you admirably.” With the rim of my cap at my lips, I added with mock concern, “Have a care, Mistress Waynflete, or you'll rub off tip as well as tear.”

“I suppose you thought 'As a jewel of gold' and the rest of it,” she said, squinting comically down to examine her nose.

“Really, no, madam; I thought of nothing so scandalous, from the Bible though it be. I thought of—of....”

“I'm all ears,” she said archly.

“I'm a poor hand at turning compliments to ladies,” said I.

“On the contrary, you turn them admirably. See!” She held up my sopping cap, and laughed merrily.

“It's ruined for best,” said I, “but it will do for market days. And now, madam, it's cold enough to freeze askers, as Joe Braggs says, and for toilet you must e'en be content with first a shiver and then a shake. I will await you at the yard gate, and pray close the door behind you. The quicker the better.”

She rejoined me in two or three minutes. I closed the gate cautiously behind me, and we started our journey. From the farm we got away quite unobserved, but I looked behind me at every other step to make surer, till we turned the top of the knoll, and it was with great relief that I saw the chimney−pots sink out of sight.

For a time we walked along briskly and in silence. So far I had carried everything with a high hand and successfully, but the cold grey of the morning began to creep into my thoughts as I looked ahead over miles and miles of dreariness and danger. Houses were few and far between; every village was a source of danger; the high roads were closed to us by our fear of the troops. Further, the object we had in view was vague and unformed, if not impossible of achievement, for even if we arrived at the very place where Colonel Waynflete was held

prisoner, what could we do to help him? We should be safe from immediate need and danger if we could reach the Prince's army, but where that was, and which way it was travelling, were unknown to us. Certain it was that between us and any real help ranged some thirty miles of cold, bleak country packed with enemies for miles ahead. And here we were, on foot, penniless and hungry. I had longed for a man's work; this was a regiment's.

A sidelong look at my companion drove all the mist and frost out of my heart. Something about her made me feel a sneak and a traitor even for harbouring such thoughts. From the first she had asked for no help of mine. I had forced it on her, or circumstances had forced me to help her in helping myself, as when I cut our way from Marry−me−quick's cottage. The more I was with her, the better I began to understand Brocton's madness. It was the madness of the mere brute in him to be sure, and a man should kick the brute in him into its kennel, though he cannot at times help hearing it whine. Her majestic beauty had dazzled him as a flame dazzles a moth, but at this stage, at any rate, it was not her beauty that made me her thrall. That I could have withstood. Because she was so beautiful, so stately, so compelling, she made no appeal to me. What I mean is, that I did not fall in love with her at first sight, simply because the mere stupidity of such a thing kept me from doing it. Glow−worms do not fall in love with stars or thistles with sycamores. She was something to be worshipped, served at any cost, saved at any sacrifice, but not loved. No, that was for some lucky one of her own class and state, not for a simple squireling like me. Her comradeship, her graciousness, her sweet equalizing of our positions, were, I felt, just the simple, natural adornments of the commanding modesty which was her spiritual garment.

Manlike, however, I had an evil streak in me, and thence, later, came madness. In any company I must be top dog. I had been head of the school, not because of any special cleverness, but because I would burst rather than be second to anybody in anything. I had fought and fought, at all hazards, until not a boy in school or town dare come near me. So now, since my Lord Brocton—and many a lord beside, I doubted not—had failed, I must needs step in and say, “I will please her, whether she like it or not.” And so, plain countryman as I was, I had done my work ungrudgingly but not, I feared, too modestly, and since I could not speak court−like, I had been over−masterful, and given her mood for mood, and turned no cheek for her sweet smiting. And as I had of old time licked every lad in Stafford, so now neither Staffordshire nor all the King's men in it should turn me back. Through she should go, and in safety and comfort, so that when the time came for me to hand over my precious charge to a worthier, she should say that the yokel had done a man's work and done it gentlemanly. Therefore, when Mistress Waynflete looked up to me from the bleak uplands with serious, questioning eyes, I said, as calmly as if we were pacing the garden at the Hanyards, with Kate and Jane active in the kitchen behind us, “Ham and eggs for breakfast!”

“I don't see any,” she said, in answering mood, scanning the fields around us. “Not that that matters. I didn't see the steps, but they were there. You make me think, Master Wheatman, of a Turk I saw in a booth at Vienna, who drew rabbits and rose−bushes out of an empty hat. Staffordshire is your conjurer's hat. And I do like ham and eggs.”

My assurance and her comfortable belief in it made us both brighter, and we stepped out merrily. She gave me an entertaining account of Vienna, where she had spent some months, and which was then the great outpost of Christendom against the Turk. When this talk had brought us on to the field of Hopton Heath, I gave her the best account I could of the battle there in the Civil War time, and of the slaying of the Marquis of Northampton. And this led me on to my pride of ancestry, and I told her of Captain Smite−and−spare−not Wheatman, a tower of strength to the Parliament in these parts, who fought here and later on Naseby Field itself. Many tales I told of him that had been handed down from one generation of us to another, and how so greatly was he taken with his incomparable lord−general that he had named his first−born son Oliver, and ever since there had been an Oliver Wheatman of the Hanyards. Then I told how one of these later Olivers, which one a matter of no consequence, had written verses and put them into the mouth of the doughty Smite−and−spare−not, sitting his horse, stark and strong, at the head of his men on Naseby Field, and gazing with grim, grey eyes on the opening movements of the fight. And, nothing loth, I trolled them out roundly across the meadows, till the peewits screamed and a distant dog began to bay:

“Princelet and king, and mitre and ring,
Earl and baron and squire,
Oliver worries 'em, harries and flurries 'em,
With siege and slaughter and fire.

With the arm of the Flesh and the sword of the Spirit,
  Push of pike and the Word,
Smiting and praying, and praising and slaying,
  Oliver fights for the Lord.
With the sword He brought the work is wrought,
  We finish here to−day.
When yon rags and remnants of Babylon
  Are blown and battered away.
    Hurrah for the groans of 'em, soon shall the bones of 'em,
Steady! Hell−rakers at large,
Rot under the sod. *Pass the word: 'God*
Is our strength?' There goes Oliver. Charge!"

When I had done she applauded so that my face burned until I was discommoded and fell into her trap.

"I wish you'd written them, Master Wheatman."

"Well, I did," said I grumpily, not liking to be bereft of any little glory in her eyes.

"What, you?" Her eyebrows arched and her lips curled. "You, oh, never. 'Smiting and praying'? 'The arm of the Flesh and the sword of the Spirit.'" She mouthed the words deliciously.

"But, doubtless, when you see my Lord Brocton again, you'll put in the Word and the praying." Here her sweet voice trailed off into a dainty snuffle: "'My dear lord, since out of the mouths of babes and sucklings proceedeth wisdom, hearken, I pray you, unto me, Oliver Wheatman, to wit of the Hanyards, and amend ye your ways lest I hit you over your cockscomb again, and very much harder than before. Repent ye, my lord, for the hour is at hand, and if you don't, I'll thump you into one of our Kate's blackberry jellies.' And here endeth the goodly discourse of that saintly rib−roaster, Master Hit−him−first−and−then−pray−for−him Wheatman of the Hanyards."

It was simply glorious to be so tormented by this witch with the dancing blue eyes.

"For this scandalous contempt of the Muses," said I soberly, "I shall punish you by frizzling your share of the ham to a cinder."

During my schoolboy days I had roamed the countryside till I knew it as an open book, and this minute knowledge was our salvation now. The immediate need was food, and food obtained without price and without our being observed by anyone. At seven o'clock on a hard winter morning in open country, this seemed to require a miracle. As a matter of fact, it was as easy as shelling peas.

Since crossing the heath we had been travelling nearer to one of the main roads, that leading out of the east gate to the town, and now we got our first glimpse of it lying like a broad, brown ribbon half−way down the slope of a very steep hill. In the upper half, this hill was pretty well wooded and the road cut clean through the wood, but between us and the wood there lay the level crest of the hill, cut by hedges into several fields, and crossed by a rough cart−track leading past a roomy, one−storied cottage, grey−walled and brown−thatched, and on through the wood into the main road. The cottage, with its outbuildings, made a little farmstead, and here lived Dick Doley and his wife Sal, who did a little farming, but mainly lived by huckstering. Today was market−day at Stafford, and unless they had broken the routine of half a lifetime, they would now be packing their little cart with marketables and soon be off for the town. They had neither chick nor child, lad−servant nor lassie, and they would leave the cottage empty and at our disposal. At this time of the day I could, of course, have trusted both, but they were very human bodies of a sort to rejoice the business side of the heart of Joe Braggs, and it was best not to give them the chance of blabbing later in the day when, for a moral certainty, they would both be market fresh. Besides, it was unfair to thrust myself on the kindness of anyone. I had more than once wondered what had happened to poor little Marry−me−quick.

I scrambled through the hedge and peeped down the road. I was right. Dick and his wife were busy loading up. So we waited behind the hedge till they had cleared off, and indeed did not move till I saw them and their cart pass along the road at the foot of the hill.

Time has not blurred the memory of a single detail of our stay in this welcome house of refuge, but the telling of what was moving and charming to me would, I fear, bore others. There was a ham, two indeed, and flitches beside, in the rack hanging from the ceiling, and there were eggs —three, to be precise—in the larder, to which,

by equal good luck considering the time of the year, I added two more by a raid into the hen−house. It was all natural and simple enough, but Mistress Waynflete hailed their production almost as amazedly as if I had indeed drawn them out of my hat. But how I fetched and carried, chopped wood and drew water, swept the floor and laid the table, fried ham and boiled eggs, doing all these things with music in my heart and a noisy song on my lips—is everything to me and nothing to my tale.

Mistress Waynflete had disappeared into one of the three or four rooms of which the house consisted, to make herself presentable, as she absurdly put it. When the table was laid and the ham cooked, I halloed the news to her, and rushed off to the shed to attend to my outward appearance. I did want it, being indeed not far short of filthy.

Perhaps I hurried unexpectedly. At any rate, on returning I found Mistress Waynflete bending over something on the hearth. Straightening herself hastily, and with a pretty confusion, at my approach, she cried, “Oh, Master Oliver, the ham was burning, and you threatened my share of it, you know!”

I could not reply. Down to her hips her rich amber hair flowed like a bridal veil, and from amid a wealth of snowy lace, fluttering on the orbed glory of perfect womanhood, her neck rose smooth and stately as a shaft of alabaster. Her cheeks crimsoned with maiden shamefastness, but the blue eyes met mine without a hint of maiden fear, and for that thanks as well as reverence filled my heart as I bowed to her. Maidenlike, she drew her golden veil more closely over her bosom, and tripped back to finish her toilet, leaving me amated and abashed by the vision I had beheld. I think it was from that moment that my joy in my work began to be mingled with the despair of my love. Certainly it was a chastened Oliver Wheatman who placed a chair for her when she came in again for breakfast, and helped her to the good things a kindly fortune had provided.

It is my belief that each of us was secretly amused at the steady zeal with which the other attacked the meal. We wrangled over the odd egg, each insisting on the other having it, she because I was strong, and needed it, I because I was strong and could do without it, and finally adopted the usual compromise. We had more than gone round the clock with barely a mouthful, and we ate as those who know not where the next meal's meat is to come from. Frankly, I, at any rate, gave myself a fair margin before the pinch should come again, and Mistress Waynflete averred that she had never in her life before eaten so much or so toothsomely.

Our meal over, I stacked the fire with fresh logs, asked and obtained permission to smoke a pipe, and made my sweet mistress cosy in the chimney−corner. Then we began to take stock of our position.

“There's no good to come of hurrying,” said I. “Here we are both snug and safe, and your night's rest was but short. Let us see where we stand.”

I did not really believe that any amount of talking would help much, but repose would do her good, and I had a big idea running in and out of my mind. Our first difficulty, food and rest, had been overcome, and I was bent on mastering the next. No amount of discussion gave us any key to the one great mystery. When Brocton had captured Colonel Waynflete at Milford, the obvious thing to do with him was to send him prisoner to the Duke at Lichfield. Though the Colonel carried no papers which made his purpose clear, Brocton knew well what the object of his journey was, and the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act put the Colonel in his power. Or, he might have carried him before a justice of the peace, his friend Master Dobson for choice, and had him committed to the town jail. The course actually taken, that of sending him ahead, under guard, in the very van of the royal army, was to us utterly inexplicable. His mad lust for Mistress Margaret explained the separation of father and daughter. The thought did occur to me, though I took great care not to hint at it, that he intended to make away with the Colonel, and looked to finding tools among his blackguardly dragoons and an opportunity when in actual conflict with the Highlanders. I hesitated, however, to believe that Brocton was such a villain as to commit an unnecessary murder. The plan he had adopted had, anyhow, this advantage to us that, when we did come into touch with the prisoner, our chances of assisting him were far greater than if he were in jail in Stafford or Lichfield.

Whatever my lord's motives were, it was clear that he was not acting in the plain, straight−dealing manner to be expected of one in his position. There were other signs of crookedness, slight but not without weight. I could understand his joy on finding me at Marry−me−quick's. It meant that I was a rebel, and as a loyal man, who had gone to expenses to prove his loyalty, he might easily get the Hanyards as a reward, and thus round off the family property in our neighbourhood. His reference to a “solatium” puzzled me, but it did not seem anything of consequence. What had I but the Hanyards to solace him with? A more important puzzle had been his behaviour at Master Dobson's. To find me on the royal side, as he then supposed, and to hear my reason for it, had clean

dazed him. Then there was the look, a signal−look beyond a doubt, which I had surprised him giving his bully, Major Pimple−face, and which was followed by the latter's attempt to embroil the stranger from London in a row.

“It is useless, Master Wheatman, to speculate further on what Lord Brocton is doing,” said my mistress at last. “He has his ends. I am one of them. Another is, no doubt, to fill his pockets, somehow or other. It was common talk in town that he was head over ears in debt.”

While we had talked and had rested, I had not been idle. Dick Doley's roomy kitchen had two windows, one overlooking the cart−track, and another the slope of the hill. The hill was so made and the house so placed that from this second window we could see the strip of road at the bottom of the hill where it curved on to the level again. I had kept a sharp look out on that bit, but had seen no one pass along it either way as yet.

In one corner of the room Dick kept an ancient fowling−piece, more of a tool of husbandry than a weapon, since his only use for it was to scare birds. It was a heavy, unhandy thing, with a brass barrel down which I could have dropped a sizable duck egg, and round its thick−rimmed nozzle some one had rudely graven, “Happy is he that escapeth me.” I fetched it out of its corner, and cleaned and oiled it. I now loaded it, for powder−horn and shot−bag hung near it on the wall, putting in a handful of the biggest sort of shot, swan−shot as I should call them. During this task, Mistress Waynflete watched me narrowly, but made no reference to it.

“Now,” said I, “our main requisite is the stuff, the ready, the rhino, the swag—call it what you will. How do you fancy me as a knight of the road? The first copper−faced farmer I come across shall surely stand and deliver. Here's an argument he cannot resist.”

At last my scrutiny of the road was rewarded. A solitary horseman came in sight from the direction of the town.

“Mistress Waynflete,” said I, picking up the fowling−piece, “there's a traveller yonder coming from Stafford. It will be well if I go and ask him a few questions.”

She almost leaped at me, red anger flashing in her eyes but her face white as milk. “Sir,” she said, “you shall not turn thief for me. I will not have it.”

“Pray, madam,” replied I huffily, “expound the moral difference between stealing ham and stealing guineas. I'm all for morality.”

“I cannot, Master Wheatman, but you must not, shall not go.” She caught hold of my sleeve. “Say you won't! If you are found out it means—”

“I shall not be found out. You may take that for sure. Think you that I cannot pluck yon chough without being pinched? It's no more robbery than our eating Dick's ham and eggs. We are soldiers in enemy's country, and we plunder by right of the known rules of war. As a concession to your prejudices in favour of the jog−trot morality of peace, I will e'en ask him whether he be for James or George, and borrow or command his guineas in accordance with his reply. Loose my sleeve, madam!”

I loosened the grip of her fingers, and led her back to her chair. “You overrate my danger, sweet mistress, and under rate our need. Without money, we might as well lie under the nearest hedge and leave Jack Frost to settle matters his way, and a cold, nasty way it would be. Your guinea is a good fighter, and we need his help. It must be done, and, never fear, I'll carry it through safely.”

So I left her, white hands grappling the arms of her chair, and white face turned away from me.

CHAPTER IX. MY CAREER AS A HIGHWAYMAN

I left the cottage from the rear and struck slantwise across the fields to reach the shelter of the trees and undergrowth that covered the slope down to the road. I ran hard so as to shake irresolution out of my mind, for I found myself half wishing that Mistress Waynflete had pleaded with me at first instead of trying to thrust me out of my plan. After all the highwayman's was hardly my calling in life. So I ran hard, saying to myself that it must be done, and the sooner it was over the better. Then I laughed. With my rusty old birding−piece I was as ill−equipped for highwaymanship as I was for farming with my Georgics. “Stand and deliver,” quoth I to myself, “or I'll double your weight with swan−shot.” Were the unknown horseman a resolute man armed with a hair−trigger, I was as good as done for.

Arrived in the shelter of the wood, I began picking my way through the thick undergrowth towards the road. Fallen branchlets snapped beneath my heedless feet and the sounds rang in my ears like pistol−shots. A saucy robin cocked his care−free eye on me from the top of a crab−tree, and I could have envied him as I stumbled by. It was perhaps fourscore yards through, and half−way I stopped to listen. Yes, there came to my ear the slow trot−ot−ot of hoofs on the hard road. I went on again until, through the leafless tangle, I began to get glimpses of the highway. My fate was dragging me on. In a month's time my shrivelling carcase might be swinging in chains on the top of Wes'on Bank, an ensample to evil−doers. The thought made me shiver, and I jerked out a broken prayer that my intended victim might turn out some fat, unarmed farmer, as easy a prey as an over−fed gander. Then I cursed myself for a fool. No man can mortgage past piety for present sin. Who was I that I should be allowed to steal on good security?

Trot−ot−ot. Trot−ot−ot. He was within easy shot now, and I stopped to make sure of my rickety old weapon. A dragoon's musket would not have needed such constant care. “Life turns on trifles,” said Mistress Waynflete.

In lifting my eyes from the priming to move on again, something in the line of vision made me start. On my left, less than a dozen paces from me, there lay on the ground, on a clean patch beneath a conspicuously−forked hawthorn, a man's jacket and plumed hat.

A lion playing with a lamb would not have given me pause more abruptly. I stole silently up to them. They were fine but somewhat faded garments, modish and even foppish, and, so far as I could distinguish any peculiarity, military in appearance, and evidently belonged to a person of some quality. Nor had they been flung there in haste, for the coat was neatly folded and the hat disposed carefully on top of it. How long had they been there? I picked up the hat, and there was still the gloss of recent sweat on its inside brim.

This, however, was no time for idle problems, a very urgent one being on hand. Forward I crept to the side of the road, and, lying flat down on the ground, pushed the stock of my gun on to the short grass, and peeped cautiously to my right down the hill. I was about thirty or forty yards from a bend in the road, and had intended to be much less, but my discovery and my confused, half−conscious thinking about it, had deflected me a little from my course.

Trot−ot−ot. He would be in sight in a few seconds. Trot−ot−ot, plainer than ever, and there he was. The moment that he was in full view I made an astonishing discovery, and saw an astonishing sight.

The discovery was that the solitary horseman, walking his powerful grey with a slack rein, and lost in thought, was Master Freake.

The sight was the rush of three men from their lurking−places in the brushwood. Two of them were soldiers, and Brocton's dragoons at that, a sample of the town−sweepings Jack had complained of. One seized the reins, the other held a carbine point−blank at the horseman's head.

These were plainly deserters or freebooters, acting after their kind, and they had picked up a strange partner during their foray. He wore a yokel's smock much too big for him, and yet not big enough to hide his bespurred riding−boots. On his head he had a dirty tapster's bonnet, and his face was completely hidden by a rudely−cut crape vizard. This singular person was evidently the leader of the gang. He threatened Master Freake with a glittering, long−barrelled pistol, and in gruff, curt tones ordered him to dismount on pain of instant death.

Here was a strange overturn to be sure. Here again fate had rudely upset my plans, and no fat purse would there be for me in this coil. However, though I would have robbed Master Freake willingly enough, my blood

being up and he a manifest Hanoverian, I was not going to see Brocton's ruffians rob him, much less kill him. The purse must wait, and when I took it—for take it I must—God would perchance balance one thing against the other.

All that I had seen and thought took place in a mere fraction of time, and even before Master Freake had pulled up, I was creeping like a ferret from bush to bush to get nearer. Then, just as in his quiet, measured tones he was asking what they wanted, I burst out into the wood, shouting, “Forward, my men, here the villains are!” With the words, I fired my handful of swan−shot clean into the group, and then charged at them yelling, in boyish imitation of a knight of old, “Happy is he that escapeth me.”

The two dragoons instantly fled with yelps of pain and terror, and the horse, squealing with fright, began to rear and plunge madly about the road. Black Vizard turned on me, his pistol rang out, and the bullet hissed by my ear. I sprang at him with clubbed gun, and struck hard for his head, but caught him on the neck as he too turned to flee. He went down, spinning and sprawling, in the road, right under the plunging horse. With a squeal that curdled my blood, she rose in the air, kicking viciously. Her hoofs came down with sickening thuds on the squirming man's skull, cracking it like an egg−shell. His body twitched once or twice, and then settled into the stillness of death.

I seized the horse's rein and soothed her. She let me pat her neck and rub her nose, and soon stood quiet, her neck flecked with foam, her flanks reeking with sweat. Master Freake, who had not spoken a word, dismounted, and I led the mare into the wood and hitched her reins over a bough. Then I returned to the man I had saved, and found him looking calmly down on the man I had killed. The black vizard was now soaking in a horrid pool of blood and brains. I stooped, and with trembling fingers moved it aside and revealed the features of the dead man. It was the pimple−faced Major.

I turned to my intended victim, and found him looking calmly and impassively at me.

“Master Wheatman of the Hanyards, unless I am mistaken,” he said.

“Your servant, sir,” said I, rather sourly. But for that dead rascal at our feet I could beyond a doubt have plucked him like a chough, and here I was, still penniless.

“Master Wheatman, I am not a man of many words, but what I say I stand by. I am your very grateful debtor for a very fine and courageous action. Three to one is long odds, but you won with your brains, sir, as much as by your bravery. Your shout was an excellent device, happily thought on.”

He held out his hand. I shook it heartily and then burst out laughing, and laughed on till tears stood in my eyes. And this was the end of my highwaymanship!

“Since the danger is, thanks to you, over, Master Wheatman,” he said, “I would e'en like to share your mirth—if I may.”

“Sir,” I replied, “I am laughing because I have saved you from robbers.”

“But why laugh?”

“Because I set out ten minutes ago to rob you myself.”

Master Freake gazed casually up and down the hill, and then, fixing his quiet grey eyes on me, said whimsically, “I am a man of peace, and unarmed; the road is of a truth very lonely, and I have considerable sums of money on me.”

“Yes, I'm quite vexed. This fire−faced scoundrel has upset my plans finely. I may not get as good a chance for hours.”

Now it was his turn to laugh. “Master Wheatman,” he said, “you are not the stuff highwaymen are made of. As you are in need of money, you need it for some good purpose, and I shall—”

He stopped short. As we stood, he was facing the wood from which the robbers had burst on him, while I had my back on it. As he stopped, his strong, calm face changed, and his eyes were fixed on something in the wood. Wonder, amazement, delight, awe—not one, but all of these emotions were visible in his face. He looked as one who sees a blessed spirit. I turned. It was Margaret, leaning, pale and spent and breathless, against the trunk of a tree, looking and shuddering at the dread object in the road.

I bounded up to her and touched her on the arm. “All's well, Mistress Waynflete,” said I. “I am as yet no gallows−bird.”

“But—” Her eyes were still staring wide on the road, and she trembled violently, so I stepped between her and the ghastly sight, and said, “Courage, dear lady. The dead man is your father's worst enemy, Major Tixall, and

yon horse killed him, not I."

By this, Master Freake had come nearer to us, and I turned to greet him.

"Madam," said I, "this is my friend, Master Freake, whom I set out to rob." To him I added, "This is Mistress Waynflete, whom I have the honour to serve."

He bared his head and bowed. "And whom I hope to have the honour of serving too."

I looked at him curiously. All other emotions had faded from his face now, but it was clear that her peerless and now so helpless beauty had appealed home to him.

"Sir," she said, recovering herself with a great effort, "I am pleased to make your acquaintance. And now,"—speaking to me,—"since you have given me a great fright and made me behave like a milkmaid rather than a soldier's daughter, perhaps you will tell me what has happened, and how it"—she looked over my shoulder—"comes to be lying there. I heard shots and shrieks that turned me to stone. What has happened?"

"Master Wheatman," said our new acquaintance, taking my words out of my mouth, "is hardly likely to give you a reasonably correct account. Allow me to be the historian of his fine conduct." He told the story with overmuch kindness to me, and as he told it the colour came back to her face, and she was herself again. While he was telling it, I noticed for the first time, or rather for the first time gathered its meaning, that she had run out after me without the domino, and in the biting air she might easily catch a chill. So while Master Freake was making a fine sprose about me, much more applicable to Achilles or the Chevalier Bayard, I slipped off and fetched the hat and coat. He was just concluding his story on my return, and without interrupting him, I clumsily thrust the hat on her head and flung the coat over her shoulders.

"Master Freake," she said, in her sweetest bantering tones, "my servant, as he absurdly calls himself, is really an artist in helping people. I told him this morning that his native shire was his conjurer's hat, when he fetched ham and eggs out of it for poor hungry me. Now he observes that I am coatless and a−cold, and lo, a hat is on my head and a coat on my shoulders. It is marvellous and nothing short of it. Nay, I shall shun him as one in league with the powers of darkness if there's much more of it. If I be saved, you remember Master Slender,"—this in a sly aside to me, —"I'll be saved by them that have the fear of God."

"Ingrate!" I cried, half angry and yet wholly delighted; "what of marvel or devilment is there in picking up a hat and coat one has found lying under a tree?"

"Major Tixall's," said Master Freake.

"Ass that I am, of course they are. Steady, Mistress Margaret, while I go through the pockets. The odds are we shall find something useful in checkmating my Lord Brocton."

In this I was wrong, for there was not a single scrap of writing in any of them. I did, however, fish out two small but heavy packets, wrapped in paper. They were easily examined, and each contained a roll of ten guineas.

"The hire of the two rascals," explained Master Freake.

"Really, Mistress Margaret," said I, "there's something in what you said just now. I do have his nether highness's own luck. I came out for guineas, prepared to rob for them, and here's twenty of the darlings lying ready for me to pick up. Now we can go ahead in comfort."

Through all this talk I was turning over in my mind what account, if any, we were to give Master Freake of our being here. If I had had only myself to consider I should have trusted him without hesitation. He was the sort of man that inspires confidence, his grave, serene, intelligent face having strength and steadfastness written in every line of it. But I had Mistress Waynflete to consider, and if any appeal was to be made for his assistance, she must make it. I'm afraid that I hoped she wouldn't, since I was jealous of any interference in my temporary responsibility for her welfare.

"Master Freake," I said, "some account will, I suppose, have to be given of yon ruffian's death. The two runaways are scarcely likely to appear as witnesses, so, for Mistress Waynflete's sake, I must ask you, should an explanation become necessary, to conceal my share in the matter."

"The manner of his death is fortunately quite obvious, and if it were not, any account I choose to give of it will pass unquestioned."

"Then it will be easy for you, I hope, to forget me when giving it. And now, madam, I think we must be moving."

"Before you go," said Master Freake, "let me say again that if I can help you, you have only to ask. You, Master Wheatman, because your twofold signal service is something it would shame me for ever not to be

allowed to return, and you, madam, because," he paused, and the curious rapt expression came over his face again, "because you are very beautiful and need help. Your father's politics will make no difficulty, so far as I am concerned."

"You know my father?" she asked, surprised.

"Know of him. My Lord Brocton was boasting last night of his capture—and of other things," he lamely concluded.

"Is he boasting this morning?" I asked.

"I have not seen him," he said, "but Mistress Dobson told me she thought he'd been rooks'−nesting and had fallen off the poplar."

"I met him again," said I, "and did not like his conversation."

"Master Wheatman means," explained Mistress Waynflete, "that he saved me from my Lord Brocton's clutches at the imminent risk of his own life." She stretched out her hands and touched the holes in my coat with her white, slender fingers. "My lord's rapier made these," she said.

"An inch to the left, my friend," quoth Master Freake, "and you'd have been as dead as mutton. His lordship, it seems, is busily piling up a big account with both of us. Well, in my own way, I'll make the rascal pay as dearly as you have in yours. If you will be pleased to accept my help, madam, I will do all I can for you. There are, fortunately, other means than carnal weapons of influencing such persons as Lord Brocton."

"Like Master Wheatman, sir, you are too good to a poor girl." She said it gratefully and humbly, and indeed so she felt, but no man could listen to her meek words without pride.

"I'm glad I turned footpad, in spite of you," said I to my dear mistress.

"I can never thank you enough," was the simple reply. "It was wicked in me to accept the sacrifice, but in God's good providence it was not made in vain."

"Then I come into the firm," said Master Freake smilingly, and when, catching the meaning of his metaphor, she smiled brightly back at him, and held out her hand, he bowed over it formally, but very kindly, and kissed it. She blushed prettily, and then, after a moment's hesitation, stretching it out to me, said, "But I must not forget the original partner." I took the splendid prize in my rough, red, farmer's hand, and kissed it reverently. The touch of my lips on her sweet, smooth flesh made me tremble, and I knew the madness was creeping over me, but I gritted my teeth, and our eyes met again. The blush had gone, but not the smile. It was not now, however, the smile of a frank maiden but of an inscrutable and dominating woman. I knew the difference, for instinct is more than experience, and I chilled into the yokel again and wondered.

"In one sense, at any rate," said Master Freake, "I am the senior partner, and as such may, without presumption, speak first. I must go on to Stone, but that will, I think, be best for our purpose. As I view the situation, two things are requisite, first that you, Master Wheatman, should get Mistress Waynflete in advance of all the royal troops, and so out of danger, and secondly that we should learn precisely what has become of Colonel Waynflete."

"Exactly," I agreed. "The action of Lord Brocton in sending the Colonel north instead of south, or at least of lodging him in jail at Stafford, is inexplicable. True, his plan separates father and daughter, which is what he wants, but either of the other methods would have served equally well for that."

Of course I said nothing of the other idea that was haunting my thoughts, the idea that Brocton was scheming to get rid of the Colonel altogether. In his lust and anger he might not stick at that, and any kind of encounter with the enemy would serve his turn. The rascals under him were worthy of their commander, a fact of which we had already ample proof.

"It looks crooked, I confess," was his reply, "but there is this to be said for it, that the Duke is following north along with the bulk of his army, and, I hear, intends to make Stone his head−quarters."

"That seems absurd," said I, "but of course he knows best."

"The movements of the Prince's army are uncertain. The plan of their leaders is never to say where the next halt will be. They will be to−day, I know, in or near Macclesfield, and I learn that it is possible they may turn off for Wales, where they believe they will find many recruits. The farther north the Duke can safely go, the better placed he will be for checking them if they do that, and his advance guard is posted at Newcastle. The question is, how are you to get there first and without being taken?"

"By travelling the by−roads," said I. "We'll go through Eccleshall."

“How long will it take you to get there?” he asked.

“About three hours,” said I, “if Mistress Waynflete can stand the pace.”

“Very good,” he replied. “I will join you there, and do my best to get horses for you in the meantime, and bring them along with me.”

“That's splendid,” said I, “but I'd rather we met outside the village. Not more than a mile and a half beyond it on the Newcastle road there's a little wayside ale−house called the 'Ring of Bells,' at the foot of a steep hill, with a large pool ringed with pines, known as Cop Mere, in front of it. It's a lonely place and will serve better. Small place as Eccleshall is, I shall skirt round it, and so get to the 'Ring of Bells.' You cannot miss it if you ride through the village on the Newcastle road. Whoever's there first will await the other.”

“Then in about three hours we'll meet at the 'Ring of Bells,' and I hope I shall bring good news of the Colonel. Believe me, dear lady, short of foul play on Brocton's part, and we have no reason to suspect that, your father will be all right. Plain John Freake is not without influence. As for the ruffian lying dead in the road, think no more of him.”

So saying he unhitched his horse, led her into the road, and mounted. He bowed and smiled, said cheerily, “A pleasant walk to the 'Ring of Bells,'“ and cantered off.

I stepped between madam and the dead man. “We've found a good friend there, Mistress Waynflete. Now we'll put the hat and coat as we found them, save for the guineas, and go back to the cottage for your domino.”

She gave them to me, and stepped out briskly towards the cottage. I folded up the coat, put the hat on it, looked again at the still, stiff horror in the road, soaking in its own blood, and silently followed her.

CHAPTER X. SULTAN

The lie of the land was as follows: To get to the “Ring of Bells,” Master Freake would have to ride over the hill to the main road at Weston, thence some six miles north−west to Stone, thence another six or seven miles south−west to the inn. Mistress Waynflete and I had a stiff walk of about nine miles in front of us. For the first three miles our way ran east by north, and then bent almost due east to the ale−house. Our difficulty would come at the bending point, for there we should have to cross the main road from Stafford along which the troops would be filtering north to get into touch with the Prince and his Highlanders. If the Duke had heard of the supposed intention of the Jacobites to turn off for Wales, he would, I imagined, send a scouting party through Eccleshall to look out for them, and we should, for the second time in our journey, be on dangerous ground in the neighbourhood of that village. The “Ring of Bells,” however, lay north of that village, off his obvious line of march in that direction, so that we stood a good chance of passing unchecked to our goal, provided that we got across the main road north in safety. Fortunately, at the place where I intended to cross, it climbed over a fairly steep hill, and we could, if need were, lie and watch the road till it was safe to venture out.

It was ticklish work at the best and any break in our run of luck might ruin us. How ticklish was vividly brought home to me within a few minutes of our getting safe under cover in the cottage. I had, of course, brought back the birding−piece and, after once more helping in the blissful task of getting Mistress Waynflete into the domino, bungling as usual over arranging the hood because my fingers lost control of themselves at the touch of her hair, I sat down to reload it, intending to carry it with me. I had settled matters with the absent gaffer, Doley, by putting one of my guineas conspicuously on the table, and was just finishing my task when Mistress Waynflete, who had stepped to the rear window and was looking back on the scene of my recent exploit, suddenly called out, “Oliver! Come here!”

My heart leaped within me at that 'Oliver.' True, it was the familiarity of one born to command, one who had last night icily desired my services in the morning, and, womanlike, knew that she could queen it over me as she listed, but still, and this was the main thing, it was familiar and friendly, and seemed to lift me a shade nearer to her.

“What is it, madam?” I asked respectfully, and ran toward her, but not so swiftly that I had not time to see the blue eyes fixed hard on mine. For answer, she turned and pointed down the hill, and there I saw the patch of brown road covered with wagons and soldiers. In five minutes they would come across the dead body of the Major.

“Good,” said I indifferently, “they save me a guinea,” and I put the coin back in my pocket. The soldiers didn't matter, but that look in her eyes did.

“Isn't that rather mean?” For some reason she spoke quite snappily. The soldiers clearly didn't matter to her, and something else did.

“Which of the soldiers provided our breakfast, madam? We might as well leave a note asking them to pick us up at the 'Ring of Bells.' And, madam, you can trust me to make Dick Doley content enough some day.”

She smiled, with her characteristic touch of chagrin. I liked her best so, for she never looked daintier. “With a bit of luck, Master Wheatman,” she said whimsically, “there will surely come a time when you'll be wrong and I right. Then, sir, look out for crowing. I've never been so unlucky with a man in my life. But you'll slip some day!”

“Surely, madam,” I said, and smiled, “and then I'll abide your gloating. Now, pray you, let us be off. We've hardly a minute to spare.”

Without losing another second we started on our long walk. It was now about ten of the clock. The sun was shining cheerily, with power enough to melt the white rime off every blackened twig it lit upon, and it was still so cold that sharp walking was a keen delight.

“Eight miles and more of it, Mistress Waynflete. I hope you can stand the pace and the distance.”

“I'm a soldier's daughter, not an alderman's,” she replied curtly.

The vicar was right. “Oliver,” he said to me one day, “what is the difference between the Hebrew Bible and a woman?”

“Sir,” said I, gaping with astonishment, “I know not, but of a truth it seems considerable.”

“It is, Oliver,” replied the sweet old scholar. “Man can understand the one in a dozen years, if he try, but the other not in a lifetime, strive he as earnestly as he may.”

This fragment of my dear friend's talk came back to me now as we walked in silence side by side. Out of the corner of my eye I could see her sweet face set in earnest thinking, her rich lips compressed, her speaking eyes fixed resolutely ahead. Not having to trouble about finding the road, and there being no sign of anyone, either enemy or neutral, stirring on the countryside, I let her go on thinking, and set myself the pleasant but impossible task of accounting to myself for her mood. I went over all we had said and done together that day, and at last, after perhaps half an hour of unbroken silence, fell back on what seemed the only possible explanation. She was thinking of her father. But why that suspicion of asperity on her face? Was this explanation correct?

The vicar was right. She suddenly slipped her hand round my arm, looking at me with laughing lips and dancing eyes, and said, “Isn't it splendid to be alive on a day like this?”

“Yes, indeed it is,” I replied, “but from your looks and your long silence, I should hardly have judged that you were thinking so.”

“You have been taking stock of me, sir!”

“Certainly I have been wondering why you were so silent, and looked so ... grave.”

“Be honest and fear not, Master Wheatman. You were not going to say 'grave.'“

“At the expense of many whippings from old Bloggs, I learned to be precise in the use of words.”

“I know, hence you were not going to say 'grave.'“

“You will allow me to choose my own words, madam.”

“Certainly, so long as you choose the right ones.”

She unhooked her hand, and we walked a minute or two without another word, she frowning, and I fuming. Then she said wistfully, “Why did you think I was cross?”

“I feared I had offended you,” said I hastily and innocently.

She laughed long and merrily. “Old Bloggs taught you the silly rigmarole you men call logic, but he didn't teach you woman's logic, that's plain. Don't you see what I've made you do, Master Wheatman?”

“Not yet, Mistress Waynflete.”

“Poof, slow−coach! I've made you admit that you were going to say 'cross' but altered it, too late, to 'grave.'“

“You outrun me with your nimble and practised wit,” said I, smiling.

“And when did you offend me, think you?”

“I answered you rather roughly when you took me up about the guinea.”

“Oh, then? Not at all. You snibbed me, but I richly deserved it.”

Another silence.

“Well?” she said. “Go on! I say I richly deserved it. Go on!”

“Go on where?” I asked testily. “You're not expecting me to say you didn't, are you?”

“No, I'm not,” she said, “but it was good practice trying to make you.” So saying, she slipped her hand under my arm again, and we stepped it out together.

The current of her thoughts now ran and glittered in the opposite direction. She made me for the moment her intimate, lifting up the veil over her past life, and giving me peeps and vistas of her wanderings and experiences. She jested and gibed. She sang little snatches of song in some foreign tongue. “You're sure you don't understand Italian?” she demanded, stopping short half−way through a bar, and quizzing me with her eyes, now blue as sapphires in the bright sunshine.

“Not a word of it,” said I.

“A grave disadvantage,” she said airily. “It's the only language one can love in.” And off she struck again.

Now she sang something soothing and sad, with a wistful lilt in it that died into a low wail. It needed no Italian to be understood, for it was written in the language of human experience. A woman's heart throbbed in the lilt and broke in the wail.

This sweet interval of intimacy verging on friendship was ended by our close approach to the main road. We had been travelling, heedless of roads and tracks, across a champaign country, and the slope up to the top of Yarlet Bank now lay before us. I led the way, skulking behind such poor cover as the gaunt hedgerows provided, and, when only a hundred paces from the top, I asked her to crouch down, awaiting my signal to advance, while I crept forward on my hands and knees to the edge of the road which here climbed the brow of the hill through a

deep cutting, along either margin of which ran a straggling hedge.

To my relief, the road down the hill, both to right and left, was completely deserted. I joyfully waved my arm to Mistress Waynflete, who was soon by my side, looking down the road. To the right we could see for nearly a mile. On the left our view was cut short by a bend, and I walked a score of yards in that direction and shinned up a stout sapling. Our luck was absolute. Not a soldier, not a living soul, was in sight.

“We might have had to skulk here for hours, waiting for an opportunity to cross unseen,” said I, on rejoining her, “but our gods above are victorious, and we share their victory. So now for the 'Ring of Bells.' There's a gate at the bottom of the hill. Come along, Mistress Waynflete!”

She followed me down the hedge−side. I turned once or twice to look at her, carefully pretending that it was only to see how she was getting on. The last time I thus stole another memory of her splendid presence we were only a few paces from the gate, and when my reluctant eyes turned again to their rightful work, they looked straight into a pair of fishy eyes set in a face as blank and ugly as a bladder of lard.

Face and eyes belonged to a big, sleek, sly man, perched on the top bar of the gate. He had a notebook in his hand in which he had been entering some jottings. He suspended his writing to examine us, picking his nasty, yellow teeth meanwhile with the point of his pencil. His horse was hitched to the post on the Stoneward side of the gate, where the stile was. He was well enough dressed, and, as far as I could see, unarmed.

It was a most exasperating thing to have pitched into him, whoever and whatever he was, and indeed I much disliked the look of him, and would gladly have knocked him on the head. True, travellers were not rare on this road, since it was part of the great highway from London to Chester, and the little thoroughfare town of Stone, some three miles ahead, had a noted posthouse. However, I kept, or tried to keep, my feelings out of my face and voice, and accosted him cheerily.

“Good day, friend! What may be the price of fat beeves in Stafford market to−day?”

“Dearer than men's heads will be at the town gates after the next assizes,” he replied, stroking his notebook and grinning evilly.

“You'll never light on a Scotsman, dead or alive, that's worth as much as a Staffordshire heifer,” said I, leading the way past him to the stile, over which I handed Mistress Margaret into the road.

“They won't all be Scotsmen, my friend,” he replied, still stroking his notebook.

“No?” said I, eager at heart to knock him off his perch.

“Nor men,” he added, leering at Margaret.

“Come along, Sal,” said I to her laughingly, “before the good gentleman jots you down a Jacobite.”

So we left him, and when, fifty paces down the road, I looked back at him, he was jotting in his notebook again.

“I think he knows something about us,” said I.

“Very likely,” she replied calmly. “I've seen him once before in London, talking to Major Tixall. Who could forget a face like that?”

“He's uglier than the big−mouthed dragoon.”

“The dragoon was at any rate a soldier.”

“And the worst of soldiers has, no doubt, some savour of grace in him.”

“Quite so,” she retorted. “His calling makes it necessary.”

“And, so reasoning, you would say, I suppose, that the best of farmers was to seek in the higher reaches of manliness.”

“Have I not told you, Master Oliver, that between man's logic and woman's logic there's a great gulf fixed?”

“Minds are minds,” said I.

“And hearts are hearts,” replied she, and so shut me up to my thinking again.

We turned into a cart−track on our left leading in the direction of Eccleshall. As we turned I saw that Bladder−face had mounted his horse and was coming on toward Stone. There was no doubt that we should be pursued from that quarter before long, and I grew heavy with anxiety as I saw how hardly we were being pressed. The encounter had not, however, disturbed Mistress Waynflete. On the contrary, she became gayer than ever, so gay that, fool−like, I got quite vexed at it, for it was clear that something had relieved her anxiety, and I knew it was nothing that I had done. I worried over it, and at last hit on the explanation. She was rejoicing in the help of the new partner.

“What do you make of Master Freake?” said I boorishly, cutting short a lightsome trill, more Italian maybe.

“Make of what?” said she lightly.

“Master Freake.”

“Forgive me, Master Wheatman,” she replied, “but I didn't take you as quickly as I ought to have done. I like the look of him. How pretty, pluck them for me.”

I stopped to gather the spray of brilliant vermilion berries she fancied, saying meanwhile, “I wonder what he is? Tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor, or what?”

She seemed much more concerned with her berries, which she praised rapturously, and placed carefully in the bosom of her riding−dress before replying.

“He's no doubt a grave and prosperous citizen of London. I've seen many such, and he looks sworn brother to worthy Alderman Heathcoat. Moreover, he talks merchantlike.”

It seemed pretty certain that she had hit the right nail on the head. Her explanation fitted his account of the large sums he was carrying and his stay with and hold over Jack's father. True, Staffordshire seemed the wrong place for such a man. Both he and his money would have been far safer in Change Alley. If her explanation was acute and probable, her manner of making it had convinced me that my explanation of her gaiety was wrong. Of him she certainly had not been thinking. Then there was only one thing left to account for it. What makes a maid as merry as a grig? Didn't our Kate sing all morning when Jack was coming in the afternoon?

It was no concern of mine, and as a man sometimes makes his right hand play his left hand at chess, so I now made stern Oliver lecture paltering Wheatman, but without doing him much good. Naturally all this made me a poor companion on the road, and for a long time Mistress Waynflete bore with me patiently. Then she turned from her tra−la−la−ing to waken me up, roundly declaring that I was bored with her company; and I had no defence, ridiculous as the charge was.

“I've sung every song I know, and sung them my best, too, and you've never once praised me. You'll have to learn, you know, Master Oliver, to smile at a lady even when you really want to smack her. What do you do? You just write on your face as plainly as this”—and here her dainty finger toured her face, ending up where the tear of milk had trembled —“S−M−A−C−K.” I roared aloud, she did it so frankly and mirthfully. What a treasury of moods she was! She had stepped across our house−place like a queen, she had fronted that devil, Brocton, like a goddess, and now she was larking like a schoolmaid.

Long as the way was, we seemed to me to be getting over the ground too rapidly. Mistress Waynflete did not tire, and did full credit to her father's soldiership. We circled round the red−tiled roofs of Eccleshall, and at length took shelter in the pines that ringed the great pool. Across the mere lay the road, and on the far side of the road from us was the “Ring of Bells,” standing well back, with a little green in front, in the centre of which a huge post carried a board bearing the rudely painted sign of the ale−house.

I scouted ahead, dodging from tree to tree along the edge of the mere, in order to keep out of view of anyone moving on the road. Over against the ale−house I crept still more warily through the wood to the edge of the road. There was no one moving in or about the ramshackle little place, but there was one unexpected thing in sight which gave me pause. Hitched by the reins to a staple in the signpost was the finest horse I had ever set eyes on, a slender, sinewy stallion, champing on his bit and pawing nervously on the stone−hard ground.

Here was the shadow of a new trouble, though, indeed, there was nothing to be surprised at, seeing that the countryside far and near was buzzing with enemy activities. A rat in a barn might as justly complain of being tickled by straws as I of jostling into difficulties. The horse without betokened a rider within, and probably some one in the Duke's horse. I beckoned Mistress Waynflete, and by signs indicated that extreme caution was necessary. During the moments I was awaiting her I examined the birding−piece to make sure it was in order. Caution, however, she flung to the winds, for the moment she set eyes on the horse she joyously shouted 'Sultan' and made a wild, happy dash to cross the road.

I stopped her sternly, and in a brief whisper asked, “Who's Sultan?”

“Father's horse.”

“We do not know for sure that your father is in the inn because his horse is outside, and by your leave, madam, we'll make sure first. Keep right behind yon thick tree, and await my return.”

She looked calmly at me, but even before she could glide off, there came from the ale−house an appalling volley of oaths and curses. It was a man's voice, yelling in agonized blasphemy, and a woman's shrill treble

floated on the surface of the stream of virulence.

I caught Mistress Waynflete's wrist and steadied her. “Not your father, apparently?” I said in a cool voice, though my head was whirling a bit under the strain. “Here,” I went on, fetching a fistful out of my pocket, “are some guineas. Follow me, unhitch the horse, and if I shout to you to be off, mount him from yon horse−trough, and away like lightning. That's the road to Eccleshall, along which Master Freake is bound to come.”

I thrust the guineas into her hand, gripped my weapon, slipped out of the pines and across the road, circled the horse, and made to peep round the jamb of the open door into the guest−room of the ale−house. As I did so, the man yelled, “God damn, I'm on fire!” and the woman shrieked back, “Burn, you foul devil, burn, and be damned!”

This was enough, and I burst in on a spectacle, strange, serious, on the point of becoming terrible, and yet almost laughable. In the middle of the room, a stout, shock−headed, red−elbowed woman stood, a pikel in her strong outstretched hands. The sergeant of dragoons, with his back to a roaring fire, was pinned against the hearthstead by the pitchfork, the tines of which were stuck in the oak lintel of the chimney−piece, so that a ring of steel encircled his throat like the neckhole of a pillory, and held him there helpless and roasting. When I first caught sight of him he was making a frenzied attempt to wrench the prongs out, but, finding it hopeless, drew his tuck, and lashed out at the woman. She calmly shifted out of reach along the handle of the fork. He then hacked fiercely but without much effect on the wooden handle, and finally, in his despair and agony, poised the tuck and cast it at her javelin−fashion. The woman, cooler than he in both senses of the term, dodged it easily. How she had contrived to pin him in such a helpless manner, I could not imagine. The motive was obvious. A little girl lay writhing and sobbing on the floor amid the fragments of a broken mug and a scattering of copper and silver coins.

“You've got him safe enough, mother,” said I, “and it's no good cooking him since you can't eat him.”

“Be yow another stinking robber, like this'n?” she demanded. The epithet was as apt as it was vigorous, for the stink of singeing cloth made me sniff. “If y'be,” she went on, “I'll shove' im in the fire and set about yow.”

“Not a bit of it, mother. I've come to help you, but shift him along a bit out of the heat, and then we'll settle what to do with him.” To him I added, “Understand, sergeant, any attempt to fight or fly, and your neck will be wrung like a cockerel's.” Then laying down my gun I pulled out the tines and shifted him along the lintel till he was out of danger. The woman, whose fierce determination never faltered, jammed the pikel in again and kept him trapped.

I went to the door and saw Mistress Waynflete standing by Sultan's head, and the proud beauty arching his neck in his joy at finding his mistress near him. I beckoned her.

“An old acquaintance, in a fix. Come in!” said I, and introduced her to the strange scene. “The sergeant, madam,” I went on, “and he has been plucked like a brand from the burning.” She took in the scene, judged what had happened, and then gathered up the child, who had ceased crying out of curiosity, and mothered the little one so sweetly that the red−elbowed woman cried out hearty thanks.

In brief the story, as collected later from the mother and child, was that the sergeant had ridden up and asked for a meal. After he had had some bread and cheese and ale, he had taken advantage of the alewife's absence to ask the child where mother kept her money, and, receiving no answer, had twisted the poor little one's arm until in her terror and agony she had told him of the secret hole in the chimney where the money was kept in a coarse brown mug. The child's cry had brought the mother running back with the pikel, snatched up on the way, and she, taking him at unawares with the mug in his hand, had darted at him and luckily caught him round the neck, and pinned him against the fireplace as I had found him. Let him go she dared not, for she was alone except for the child, and but for my arrival he would have roasted right enough till he was helpless. As it was the skirts of his coat were smouldering, and he had only just escaped serious injury. In fact, although smarting sore, he was so little damaged that after tearing away the burnt tails, he collected himself and tried to bam me.

“Master Wheatman,” he began, “I call upon you in the King's name to aid and assist me. This woman's tale is all a lie. The mug was on the chimney−top for anyone to see, and I only took it down to examine it, being struck with its appearance.”

“Also in the King's name, Master Sergeant,” was my reply, “I propose to have you handed over to the nearest justice as a rogue and vagabond.”

“And you shall explain why you are here with your—” I should have strangled him if his foul tongue had wagged one word of insult, and he saw it in my eyes. He stopped, and his face showed that he had discovered the

secret.

“The sergeant recognizes you again, Molly,” said I lightly.

“Bammed and beaten by a damned yokel?” he burst out. “Ten thousand devils! Where were my eyes yesterday?” In his anger he began to strain at his steel cravat.

“Virgil for ever! The first town we come to I'll buy me a Latin grammar,” said Margaret to me, with a low ripple of laughter.

“How'd on, fool,” said the alewife to the sergeant. “Yow wunna be wuth hangin' if y' carry on a this'n.”

“If you don't loose me, you old bitch,” he shouted, “I'll see you hanged! Loose me, for your neck's sake! These people are Jacobites!”

“Gom, I dunna know what that be, but I wish Stafford−sheer was full on 'em. 'Tinna any good chokin' y'rsen, I shanna let go.”

This method of keeping him, however, rendered the alewife useless, so I took her place, and bade her fetch the longest and toughest rope she'd got. She brought me a beauty and with it I trussed the sergeant, tying him securely into a heavy, clumsy chair, and leaving him as helpless as a fowl ready for roasting. Then a thought struck me and I went through his pockets. His very stillness made me careful in my search, but I found only some old bills for fodder and other military papers, and a heavily sealed letter addressed “To HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS.” I was not quite Jacobite enough to make me willing to steal a dispatch addressed to the Royal Duke, and I should have thrust it and the oddments of paper back again but for the rattle of hoofs outside. It was probably Master Freake, and I was particularly anxious that the sergeant should not see him, so I rushed out with all the papers in my hand to forestall him.

Hurrying outside I saw Master Freake hitching his horse to the signpost, and Mistress Waynflete already talking to him eagerly. When I got up he delivered his news briefly and to the point, and bad news it was.

He had learned in Stone that the Colonel had again been taken on ahead towards Newcastle in charge of a troop of Brocton's dragoons under the command of Captain Rigby, “last night's table companion of the dead Major,” he explained.

“Whatever for?” asked Mistress Waynflete.

Master Freake said nothing, but his eyes were troubled, and I knew there was something he would fain conceal.

“Whatever for?” she repeated. “Could you learn of no reason?”

“I was told,” he answered slowly, “that Colonel Waynflete's knowledge and assistance would be invaluable to the royal troops.”

“Told that my father had turned traitor! Is that what you mean, sir?” Scorn too great for anger covered her face, veiling its sweetness as with a fiery cloud.

“That is the plain English of what I was told, I must admit.” Here was the grave, businesslike nature of the man, plainly posing awkward questions that had to be answered.

“It's a wicked lie!” she burst out. She turned her face proudly to look into mine, and I saw that her eyes were filled with tears.

“Naturally, madam,” said I.

“My father's honour is mine, Master Wheatman, and I am your debtor for another splendid courtesy.”

“I argue from the flower to the tree. Man's logic, and therefore necessarily imperfect, you would say, but for once I stick to it.” I spoke lightly and reminiscently, so as to chase the gloom from her mind, and she was immediately herself again.

Master Freake continued his story, which went from bad to worse. As I had expected, Bladderface had ridden into Stone, and the result of his communication to Captain Rigby had been that orders were issued for our pursuit, and Master Freake had left the town not very far in advance of the squad of horse sent on our track. He had thus been unable to procure horses for us, but at Eccleshall he had managed to obtain a pillion for Margaret's use behind him.

This was awkward indeed, for though Master Freake had ridden hard, the pursuit could not be very far behind, and if, as was almost certain, the dragoons turned up at the “Ring of Bells,” the sergeant would be set free, and be after us like a mad bull. There was, however, a margin of time available, and therefore I put this problem out of my mind, and attended only to the urgent one of the Colonel's position.

To me there was only one explanation possible. This continual shifting of the Colonel, ever under the charge of those rascally dragoons, commanded now by a man whose familiarity with Tixall was an evil augury, meant one thing only. Soon, perhaps within an hour or two, there would be fighting, and under cover of that a stab in the back or a bullet in the head would clear the Colonel out of Brocton's path for ever.

“Take these papers, Master Freake,” said I. “Mistress Waynflete will tell you what has happened here, and you can give them back to their owner if you choose. But do not, I beg you, on any account let the rascal inside see or hear you.”

I raced indoors, seized the sergeant's tuck and took his baldrick from him, heedless of his vile threats. I left him there, choking with foulness, unhitched Sultan, sprang into the saddle, and cantered up to my friends.

“Now, Mistress Margaret,” I said, “describe your father so that I shall know him when I see him.”

She sketched his portrait in broad, clear outlines, and I fixed the description point by point in my memory.

“That's the road to Newcastle,” said I, pointing along the edge of the mere, “and it's fairly straight and good. Follow me there as quickly as you can, and inquire for me at the 'Rising Sun.' I'll have news of the Colonel, if not the Colonel himself, when we meet again.”

I bowed to Margaret, dug my heels into Sultan, and was off like a flash.

CHAPTER XI. IN WHICH I SLIP

Sultan was a horse for a man, long and regular in his stride, perfect in action, quick to obey, cat−like at need. I might have ridden him from the day on which the blacksmith drank his colt−ale, for we understood each other exactly, and I was as comfortable on his back as in my bed at the Hanyards. In the open road at the mere−end, he settled down into a steady, loping trot, and I was free to think matters out to the music of his hoof−beats on the road.

It was only eight or nine miles into Newcastle, and as the dragoons would travel slowly and warily there was just a chance that I should be there first. Further, it was wholly unlikely that I should be interfered with, since the only two enemies who knew I was aiding Mistress Margaret were helpless in my rear—Brocton at Stafford, and the sergeant in the “Ring of Bells.” I was unknown in the town, not having been there since my schooldays, and then only on rare occasions, as a visit to the town meant a thirty−mile walk in one day.

Plan−making was futile. Everything would depend upon chance, but if chance threw me into touch with the Colonel, it should go hard if I did not free him somehow or other. The most splendid thing would be if I could free him before Margaret overtook me at the “Rising Sun.” True, I had only an hour or so to spare, but now strange things happened in an hour of my life, and this great luck might be mine. Then would come my rich and rare reward—the light in her deep, blue eyes and the tremulous thanks on her ripe, red lips.

And then a thought smote me like a blow between the eyes, so that I dizzied a moment, and the day grew grey and the outlook blank. The finding of the Colonel meant the losing of Margaret. Father and daughter reunited, my work would be done; the day of the hireling would be accomplished. Need for me there would be none. The old life would again claim me, justly claim me too, for was I not, though all unworthily and unprofitably, the only son of my sweet mother, and she a widow. I could see her in the house−place at the Hanyards, her calm eyes fixed in sorrow on my empty chair. *A man shall leave father and mother*, yes, for one particular cause, but the only son of a widowed mother for no cause whatsoever. Christ, I said to myself, would not have raised the young man of Nain merely to get married.

Still there was the work, and I spurned my gloomy thoughts and turned to think of it. And first I took stock of my means of offence. There were loaded pistols in the holsters, fine long weapons with polished walnut stocks inlaid with silver lacery and the initials 'C.W.', the Colonel's without a doubt. At the saddle−bow there hung a sizeable leathern pouch, and this I found to contain a good supply of charges. I was a sure shot, and I tried my skill on a gate as Sultan flew by, splintering the latch at which I aimed to a nicety, the well−trained horse taking no more notice of the shot than of a wink at a passing market−wench. So far so good. Then there was the sergeant's tuck, and I shouted with a schoolboy's glee at having for the first time in my life a sword at my side. Of how to use it I knew nothing, unless many bouts at single−stick with Jack should be some sort of apprenticeship in swordcraft. I practised pulling it out, and then, imitating Brocton, made the forty−inch blade twist and tang in the air, which pleased me greatly. I felt quite a Cavalier now, and said within myself that old Smite−and−spare−not's bones should soon be rustling in their grave with envy.

And so into Meece, wondering if the fat host of the “Black Bull" would recognize in the splendidly mounted horseman the dusty schoolboy of ten years ago. There he was in the porch, grown intolerably fatter, talking to my ancient gossip, Rupert Toms, the sexton, now heavily laden with years and infirmities. I pricked on, having no time to spare for either prayer or provender, since every moment was precious, though a tankard of double October, mulled with spice and laced with brandy, would have been precious too, for the matter of that.

At the tail of the village, where the curve of the road runs into the straight again to climb the long hill, I came for a moment into touch with my affair. A horseman was in sight, rattling down the slope, and I saw that he was an officer, a keen−featured, middle−aged man, with the set face of one who rides on urgent business. Yet he checked his horse when near me, and cried curtly, “What news from Stafford?”

A word with him might be worth while, so I too pulled up and answered very politely, “It's market−day.”

“Damn the market! What news of the troops, sir? Is my Lord Brocton still there?”

“I believe he is.”

“Then damn my Lord Brocton! Did you chance to see him?”

“I had that honour late last night.”

“Anything the matter with him?”

“He'd had enough,” said I simply.

“That's what comes of shoving sprigs of your bottle−sucking nobility into the service. Damn his nobility! There's another of them back yonder, as much use as an old tup.”

“If I detain you much longer,” said I, with exaggerated sweetness, “you'll be damning me.”

“Nothing likelier. I damn everything and everybody that don't suit me. That's why I'm captain at fifty instead of colonel at thirty. What of it?”

“Lord Brocton's nine miles off, and I'm not.”

“Think I care? Damn you, too, and I'll fight you when we meet again. Like a lark! Wish I'd time now. Good day, sir!”

He dug the rowels into his horse and was off. An earnest, choleric man with his heart in his work, for which I liked him, even to his persistent damning.

I put Sultan to the slope and he kept bravely at it till I eased him off where the rise was steepest. My late encounter clearly meant that affairs were ripening fast farther north, and it might also mean danger behind me sooner than I had looked for. The blood danced in my veins at the prospect of the adventures that awaited me. Ho, for life and work! Would it be long before the blue eyes lanced me through and through again, as when I kissed her hand among the trees by the roadside? I looked at the frosty sun and judged that it was nigh on twenty−four hours since I had stood in the porch and watched mother and Kate across the cobbles into the road —twenty−four hours that had done more for me than the twenty−four years that had gone before them, for they had given me a man's task, a man's thoughts, the stirrings of a man's being, the beginning of a man's agony.

We were at the top now with the open country stretching for miles around us. But the dale beneath, through which the main road ran a mile away to the east, was thick with trees, and I could get no inkling of how things were going. I strained my ears to listen, but no warning sound could I hear. The countryside was still and calm as a frozen sea, and war and its terrors seemed so impossible that for a. moment I felt as if it was only a dream−life that I was living and that I must wake soon and hear Joe Braggs trolling out his morning song in honour of Jane. But Sultan craned round his shapely head as if to ask me why I was loitering in the cold, bleak air; so with a cheery slap on his glossy neck, I gave him the reins and away he went, with me spitting ghostly Broctons on the sergeant's tuck. Through the skirts of the woodland he carried me, and then up again till on the top of Clayton Bank I pulled him up a second time for another survey of the situation.

The little town was now in full view a mile ahead, lying on the slope and top of some rising ground. Across the meadows to my right, and now plainly to be seen less than half a mile away, was the main road from Stone. Again I was disappointed. A long, rude post−wagon, pulled by eight horses and driven by a man on an active little nag, was groaning its way south; a solitary horseman was ambling north—and that was all I could see.

What had happened to the Colonel? Were the dragoons in the town or not? I dug my heels into Sultan's flanks and put him to it at his best, and in a few minutes was on the outskirts of the town.

The town consists in the main of two streets. The High Street is simply the town part of the main road from the south and Stone to Congleton and the north—the line along which the Stuart Prince was marching. It deserves its name, for it lies along the edge of the slope on which the town lies. Parallel to it in the dip lies Lower Street, and the road I was on curls past the end of this street and climbs gently to join the upper road. I could thus get into the heart of the town through the poorer quarter of it, and soon the kidney−stones of Lower Street rang under Sultan's hoofs.

The stir and noise of Stafford was completely absent. The townspeople, mainly hatters by trade, were plying their craft indoors as if no enemy were at their gate. In fact, as I learned afterwards, there was no fuss and much fun and good business when the Highlanders actually came on the scene. The farther a town was from them the more it funked them, which was, as everybody knows now, truest of all of London. As I turned up the lane by St. Giles', the church bells chimed two. Past the church in the corner between the lane and the High Street was the “Rising Sun.” Once Sultan was safe in its stables I could set about getting news of the Colonel before Margaret and Master Freake arrived.

It was stiff work up the last thirty yards, and Sultan shook himself together after it when he drew out on the level High Street. Here were throngs of people and some signs of trouble toward. In particular I noticed the town

fathers in their black gowns of office, and, most conspicuous of all, the crimson and fur of his worship. I judged they were coming from a council meeting in the town hall, which stood in the middle of the wide High Street. There was much high debate, wagging of fingers and smiting of fist in palm, but no approach to the tumult and terror of yesternight. The Mayor stood for a moment confabbing at the door of a grocery, and then shot into it. I saw him struggling out of his gown as he disappeared, and thence inferred that the chief burgess was a grocer in private life.

So much I saw before pulling Sultan round to pass under the archway leading into the yard of the “Rising Sun.” I dismounted and called for an ostler. No man appearing, I was about to lead Sultan farther down the yard towards the stables when there was a scurry of feet behind me as if the whole ostler−tribe of the “Rising Sun” was hastening to my assistance. I turned round rattily to find myself looking into the barrel of a pistol, while three or four men pounced on me and pinned me against the wall.

“Damn ye, horse−thief, for the black of a bean I'd blow your brains out,” said Colonel Waynflete. “Stick tight, lads; and you, good host, fetch along Master Mayor and the constable, and have me the scoundrel laid by the heels. If this were only my commandery on the Rhine! I'd strappado you and then hang you within the next half−hour. My bonny Sultan! How are you, my precious?”

When a raw youth leaves farming for knight−erranting he must expect sharp turns and rough tumbles, but surely Fate and Fortune were overdoing it now. It was the Colonel beyond doubt, and Margaret had limned him to the life. The hawk−eyes, the hook nose, the leathery skin, the orange−tawny campaign−wig with the grizzled hair peeping under the rim of it, the tall, thin, supple figure, all were there. And if I had been in any doubt of it, Sultan would have settled the matter, for his pleasure at finding his master was delightful to witness.

In hot blood I did not mind a pistol, and in the coldest blood I could easily have kicked loose from the men who had got hold of me. But Margaret kept my limbs idle and my mouth shut. There was no real danger, for that matter, unless Margaret and Master Freake failed to turn up at the “Rising Sun,” and there was no reason to suppose they would fail. The Colonel gave me no chance to speak to him privately, and to speak to him publicly might upset his plans. How he had got here a free man, what strange turn things had taken in his favour, I could not imagine. Margaret would be here in an hour and put matters right, so for her sake it would be best and easiest to say nothing. I simply made up my mind that the varlet on my right, whose dirty claws and beery breath were sickening me, should have the direst of drubbings before the day was out.

Mine host bustled off for the Mayor, and, the news having gone around, the yard was filled with people watching the fun and making a mocking−stock of me. The Colonel saw Sultan off to be groomed and baited, and then, without so much as a look at me, went into the inn and sat down to his interrupted meal. I could see him plainly through the window, and hugely admired his coolness. The maids clustered around to have a peep at me. Such as were old and ugly declared off−hand that I was indisputably ripe for the gallows, but a younger one with saucy eyes and cherry−red cheeks blew a kiss, and called out to beery breath to deal gentlier with me. He moved a little in turning to grin at her, and I shot my knee into his wind and doubled him up on the ground. A stouter lad took his place, but his breath was sweet and I gained much in comfort by the change.

The situation had the saving grace of humour. For twenty−four hours I had been on the stretch to save Colonel Waynflete from his enemies. To do it I had left mother and sister, and home and lands. To do it I had come out openly on the side of rebellion and treason. The sword had been at my breast, and the wind of a bullet had stirred the hair of my head. I might have spared my pains. All this pother of mine was over the man sitting yonder, heartily enjoying his dinner. All my heroics had ended in my being arrested as a horse−thief.

I closed my eyes. Picture after picture came before me of Margaret in her changing moods and her unchanging beauty. Gad! How cheaply I had bought this gallery of precious memories!

A throng of lads crowding noisily under the archway heralded the approach of the dignitaries. First came the town beadle, a pompous little fellow who wore a laced brown greatcoat many sizes too large for him, and carried a cudgel of office thick as his own arm, and surmounted by a brass crown the size of a baby's head. His office enabled him to be brave on the cheap, so by dint of digging his weapon into the ribs of all and sundry, they being, as he expressed it, too thick on the clod, he cleared a path for the grocer−mayor, who had gotten himself again into his scarlet gown. His worship was gawky, flustered, and uncertain, and listened like a scared rabbit to mine host, a man of much talk, who explained proudly what was to be done.

“This is 'im, y'r worship,” he said. “A dirty 'oss−thief as badly wants 'anging. Copped in the act, y'r worship,

of riding into this 'ere yard o' mine, as big as bull−beef, sitting on the very 'oss 'e'd stolen from his lordship 'ere."

His lordship was the Colonel, who had leisurely left his meal again to settle my hash. I can see him now as he stood on the step of the inn−door, carefully flicking a stray crumb or two from his waistcoat, and taking the measure of the man he had to bamboozle, with clear, amused, grey eyes.

"The Mayor of the town, I think," he said softly.

"Yes, your honour," said the good man surreptitiously wiping something, probably sugar, off his hands on the lining of his gown.

"And his beadle, your lordship," added the host, and the under−strapper inside the greatcoat saluted the Colonel with a flourish of his tipstaff.

"I am Colonel Waynflete," he answered in level measured tones, "riding on important business of His Majesty's, and my horse was stolen at an inn, some miles back, beyond Stafford. But for the kindness of my Lord Brocton in providing me with another, His Gracious Majesty's affairs would have been badly disarranged. This fellow came riding in on my horse, Sultan, a few minutes ago and I ordered his arrest. He is now in your worship's hands. I leave him there with confidence, merely remarking, on the warrant of many years' observation in such matters, that he will require a stout rope."

He nodded to his dithering worship, and marched back slowly and calmly to his dinner.

"This beats cock−fighting," said mine host admiringly. He spread himself, happy and conspicuous as a tom−tit on a round of beef, and the crowd, pleasantly anticipating mugs of beer later on, urged the Mayor to be up and doing.

"What have you to say for yourself?" said his grocer−ship to me, with a dim and belated idea, perhaps, that I might be interested in the proceedings.

"The beadle's coat is much too large for him," said I.

"Yes, yes," he replied hurriedly. "Samson Salt was a big man and had only had the coat three years when he died, and we couldn't afford a new one for Timothy. Dear me, but this isn't a council meeting, and what's the beadle's coat got to do with horse−stealing?"

"As much as I have," I replied gravely.

"Yow've 'ad enough, my lad," said the host, "to last y'r the rest of y'r life. The next 'oss you rides'll be foaled of an acorn. Let Timothy put him in clink, Master Mayor, and come and have a noggin of the real thing. Gom, I'm that dry my belly'll be thinking my throat's cut."

"Arrest this man, Timothy Tomkins, and put him in jail till I can take due order for his trial."

Timothy turned up the sleeves of his coat, and arrested me by placing his hand on my arm, and flourishing the brass crown in my face.

"Don't hurt me, Timothy," I said. "I'll come like a lamb, and I'll go slow lest you should tumble over the tail of your coat."

"If you say another word about the blasted coat I'll split your head open," was his angry reply. It was evidently a sore topic with him and a familiar one with his frugal townsmen, for some man in the crowd cried out, "'Tinna big enough for the missis, be it, Timothy?" And while the peppery little beadle's eyes were searching the japer out, another added, "More's the pity, for 'er's a bit of a light−skirt." At this there was a roar of laughter, so I saved the frenzied officer further trouble by saying, "Come along, Timothy. Let's go to jail."

On the Mayor's orders, mine host despoiled me of the sergeant's tuck, and Timothy marched me off to the jail, the rabble following, as full of chatter as a nest of magpies. The jail was a small stone building, standing, like the town hall, in the middle of the street. Arrived there, Timothy thrust me into an ill−lit dirty hole below the level of the street, locked the door behind me, and left me to my reflections.

The only furniture of the den was a rude bench. A nap would do me good, so, after a good pull at Kate's precious cordial, I curled up on the bench and in a few minutes was sound asleep. And in my sleep I dreamed that two blue stars were twinkling at me through a golden cloud.

CHAPTER XII. THE GUEST−ROOM OF THE “RISING SUN”

A wisp of cloud, a long trail of shimmering gold, broke loose, swept with the touch of softest silk across my cheek, and half awakened me. I was lazily and sleepily regretting that such caresses only came in dreams, when I was brought sharply back to full life by a ripple of hearty laughter.

“Gloat on!” said I complacently.

“I knew you'd slip some time or other. Gloat! Of course I shall gloat.” And she laughed again. I should have borne it easily enough, coming from her, under any circumstances, but there was one circumstance which made it a pure joy. The white hands were busy with her unruly yellow hair, and I was so far gone foolward that I was in some sort hopeful that they were imprisoning the wisp of golden cloud that had awakened me. I bitterly regretted that I was not as nimble at waking as Jack. He would be sleeping like a leg of mutton one second and, at the touch of a feather, as wide awake as a weasel the next. I took time—it was the Latin rubbish cumbering my brain, he used to say—or I might have made sure.

Mistress Margaret was perched on the edge of my bench. She seemed in no hurry to move, and I could not get up till she did, so I lay still, cradling my head in my hands, and looked contentedly at her. It was now so gloomy that I had evidently been asleep some time.

“I knew you'd slip,” she repeated with great zest. “All men do. And I'm glad you slipped, for it proved you human. I was getting quite overawed by the terrible precision with which you did exactly the right thing at exactly the right time. It made me feel so very small and inferior, and no woman likes that. It's not nice.”

“Or natural,” said I.

“I see you're unmistakably awake, sir!” was the tart reply. She rose and took short turns up and down the cell and went on: “But why slip into jail, Master Wheatman? Why did you not tell father who you were and what you had done for me?”

“And so prove at once to the authorities in the town that he was not what he pretended to be!”

“Ho!” she said, and stopped short.

“Our idea was, I think, to free the Colonel, if we could.”

“Yes.” She was not gloating now, but wondering.

“Well, madam, I found him free, and the only advantage I can see in your plan is, that I should have had him as a companion in jail. Whereas now I've mended my night's sleep with a refreshing nap, and Master Freake has so lucidly explained things to the Mayor that Timothy of the long coat is kicking his heels at the top of the stairs, and wondering how much longer you're going to be. Shall we once more breathe the upper air, as Virgil would put it? This hole is as bad as a corner in his under−world.”

“And I laughed at you for slipping, Master Wheatman! I shall never dare to look you in the face again.”

“Don't you believe it, madam,” said I airily, leading the way to the steps. “I've heard Copper Nob say the same thing scores of times.”

“Who's Copper Nob?”

The question came like the crack of a whip, and I was glad the familiar phrase had slipped out unawares and diverted her.

“Our Kate,” I explained.

“Oh indeed, sir! A more beautiful head of hair no woman in this land possesses, and you glibly call her 'Copper Nob.' Doubtless you have selected some nice expressive name for me!”

“I shouldn't dare!” I protested hotly.

“Why not? You do it for her, brazenly and wantonly.”

“Yes, madam, but she's my sister.”

“How does that assure me?”

“A man's sister isn't a woman,” said I, and went ahead and pushed open the door. There, sure enough, was Timothy, looking very uncertain and rueful. The little man's complaisance had given me the greatest wonder of my life—Margaret's silent watching over me as I lay asleep, and I gave him a guinea with much gladness.

“The coat's too big for you, Timothy, and it's no good denying it. I'll speak to his worship about a new one of

the right length."

"Thank yer, sir," he said, grinning oafishly as he pouched the guinea. "I'd rather have a new coat than a new missus, and, swelp me bob, I want both."

Margaret joined me, and we at once made our way to the "Rising Sun." Work for the day was over, and the street was now getting thronged and noisy. Many curious looks were bent on us, but no one dared to interfere with a man of my evil reputation, a horse−thief being the last thing in desperadoes. We had only a few yards to go, but my mistress apprised me in sweet whisperings that Master Freake's explanation was that Sultan had been innocently obtained from the real thief, that I was his servant, and, not knowing of the horse deal, had loyally kept silent lest I should make mischief—a happy and reasonably truthful rendering of the real facts.

"After his private talk with Master Mayor," she added, "that worthy man's knees were as hard worked as the hinges of an ale−house door."

"The poor cringeling is but a grocer," said I, as we turned in under the archway of the "Rising Sun." The host saw us through the kitchen window, and ran out to usher us in with the assurance of a brass weathercock.

"Sommat like a jail delivery, eh, y'r 'onour? Gom, if I wudna pinch fifty 'osses to be fetched out o' clink by such a bonny lady, begging your ladyship's pardon."

"She shall fetch you out," said I sourly, "when you're jailed for not stealing."

"His honour's commands are a law unto his handmaiden," said Margaret demurely and icily, addressing him, but aiming point−blank at me. Her shot blew me clean out of the water, and I stood there guggling like a born idiot. "Curse you, will you never get out of your yokel's ways?" said I to myself. It was as if I had said to the sergeant, speaking of Jane, "She shall draw you a mug of beer." I was clean nonplussed, and felt as uncomfortable as a boiling crawfish, but fortunately rattle−pate came to my aid and drowned my confusion in a flood of words.

"And all he said, y'r ladyship, was that Timothy's coat was too big for 'im. Gom, it beat cock−fighting, it did. Swelp me bob it did. I never saw a man so staggered as the Mayor, but he's got over it fine, and gone 'ome, good man, with a crick in his back and near on a pint of my best brandy in his belly. When these 'ere wild Highland rappers and renders come, he's just primed up to make 'em a grand speech at bridge yonder, and if that dunna frighten 'em off, nuthin' wull, and my cellars will be as ill filled with beer as Timothy's coat is with brawn. I'm getting the best supper on the Chester road for yer, y'r honour, and that'll mike you feel as bold as sixpence among sixpenn'orth o' coppers. But come along, y'r ladyship. The Colonel's upstairs. Follow me!"

Words ran out of him like ale out of a stunned barrel. He clacked on incessantly on the way upstairs, and clacked as boldly as ever as he ushered us into the room, where the Colonel was awaiting us alone.

"'Ere 'e is, y'r lordship," he said gustily. "'Ere's the nobby gentleman as didna steal yer 'oss. But yow'd best keep yer eye on 'im, on my say so. He'll pinch sommat o' yow'n yet afore 'e's done."

The Colonel, who was toasting his toes at a roaring fire, rose as I followed Margaret towards him. He made me a precise and formal bow, which I imitated farmer fashion. "This is Master Oliver Wheatman of the Hanyards, father," said Margaret, in so low a tone that the host, lingering, hand on door−knob, nearly a dozen paces behind us, could not have heard her.

"Pleased to make your acquaintance, sir," he said, repeating his bow.

"The honour is mine, sir," I replied, repeating mine, and wondering the while if I ever should learn to bend like a willow instead of a jointed doll.

"Nay, I protest, sir." This suavely to me; then, stepping sharply towards the host, he stormed, "Damn ye, man, get on the landlord's side of the door, or I'll rout it down around your lazy ears. Slids! I've shot an innkepeer for less in the Rhineland."

"Them 'ere furriners—" began the host, but the Colonel swamped him with something of which I could make out nothing except that it was a fairly successful attempt to talk and sneeze at the same time. It finished off the host, who retired, beaten with his own weapon. The victor, waiting till the door was closed, tiptoed up to it and listened carefully.

"A rather interesting feature about dad," whispered Margaret with mischief in her eyes, "is that when he's angry he curses in French, and when he's mad he execrates in German."

"Neatly rounding off his daughter's accomplishments," said I.

"And how, sir?"

"Who gibes in English and loves in Italian."

She stabbed me with her eyes, and said, “Your services give you no privileges, sir.”

“I know that, madam, but my yokelship does.”

I spoke lightly, keeping the bitterness of my heart out of my voice, though it had surged up into my speech. I may have been mistaken, misled by the flickering fire−light, but the anger seemed to melt out of her eyes.

The return of the Colonel ended our cut−and−thrust.

“Soldiering,” he said, “is nine−tenths caution and one−tenth devilment. Yon glavering idiot has long ears to match his long tongue. And now, sir, let me greet you as I should.”

He seized my hand, shook it warmly, and continued, “A father's thanks, Master Wheatman, for your kindness to my Margaret. Anon she shall tell me the whole story, but I know already that you are a gallant gentleman whom I shall have the honour of turning into a fine soldier, and neither angel, man, nor devil could make you fairer requital.”

Praise and promise were far beyond any desert or hope of mine, but I said boldly, “I am no gentleman, but just a plain, few−acred yeoman, who has tried to serve your daughter—”

“Tried?” he snorted. “Tried, indeed! I've been soldiering man and boy these forty odd years, and, slids, I've never known better work.” He ran me up and down with his eyes and, turning to Margaret, continued, “By the beard of the prophet, Madge, Master Oliver Wheatman of the Hanyards is a vast improvement on the Baron.”

Margaret blushed daintily and hastily covered his mouth with her fingers.

“You dare, dad, and I won't kiss you good night.”

“Damme,” he said, freeing himself and grinning at me with delight. “This is rank mutiny. Prithee note, Master Wheatman, the prepare−to−receive−cavalry look in her eye! The last time I lost her was at Hanover, and she rejoined me, if you please, at Dresden.”

“Magdeburg, you libellous old father,” said Margaret, pouting.

“So it was,” he said heartily, conceding the point. “Escorted by, or escorting, I was never clear which, a fat German baron nearly five feet high, who begged me to horsewhip her into marrying him.”

“You shot him?” said I, so very energetically that Margaret's pout turned into a smile.

“Dear me, no,” he said, pretending to yawn. “I left him to Madge, poor fellow! I hope you've given her every satisfaction, Master Wheatman.”

“That he hasn't,” said Margaret briskly. “He's spent far too much time putting me in what he considers my proper place.”

“My friend,” said he to me gravely, “you're in for a dog's life.”

“You're right about the life, dad, but wrong about the dog. Good−bye till supper, you nasty ripper−up of your daughter's character!”

So saying, she kissed him on each cheek, smiled at me, and left us.

“I'd like to sluice the jail feeling off myself,” said I to the Colonel.

“Right,” he replied, looking at his watch. “You've just half an hour. I find England irksomely restful and law−abiding after the Continent, but I'm glad of it for once. I should be damnably vexed if I'd hanged you, and Madge wouldn't have liked it either.”

He had a grave voice, like a judge's, and a quick, pert eye, like a jackdaw's. Outwardly he was as unlike Margaret as the haft of a pike is unlike a lily, but I already saw her spirit in him.

“Sir,” said I, “when I am fortified by a good supper, I will venture to indicate my preferences on the subject.”

He took out his snuff−box, tapped it carefully, opened it, and held it out to me.

“You have begun well, sir. I hear you are a great scholar, Latin and all that, quite pat. Damme, sir, those ancients understood things. They knew how to honour the gods, for they made soldiers of 'em and set 'em fighting in the clouds. There's divinity for you! You've got twenty−eight minutes.”

I laughed and left him.

The room in which my introduction to the Colonel had taken place was immediately over the archway. Its window opened on to a balcony which, supported on thick oak balks, stood over the causeway of the street; its door was in a passage leading from one wing of the house to the other, and in the passage were three leaded lattice−windows of greenish glass, plentifully sprinkled with blobs and nodes, giving on the long inn−yard. The room was thus admirably situated for people in our precarious position, having a look−out back and front, and a way of escape right and left.

The cherry−cheeked lass who had thrown me the kiss was tripping past the door as I opened it. She told me that she had been attending on "er ladyship,' and willingly led me to a bedroom and brought me thither the things I needed for my sluicing, among them a passable razor and a huckaback fit to fetch the hide off a horse.

“Give me now the kiss you threw me,” said I, as she was turning to leave.

“Nay, sir,” she said. “You're not in trouble now, and dunna need it.”

“Lassie,” said I, “that's a right womanly reply, and here's something to buy a ribbon with that shall be worthy of you.” And I gave her one of the dead Major's guineas.

“Thank yer, sir,” she said. “And besides there's no need for you to be kissing the likes of me.”

“You're a sweetly pretty lassie,” said I.

“Y' dunna want to be gawpin' around after pennies when there's guineas to be picked up,” she replied, with a toss of her head. “Struth, I wish at times I wasna quite so pretty. There's some men, bless you, I know one myself, such fools that they think a pretty wench doesna want kissin'. But, sartin sure, there's never been the like of 'er ladyship in Newcastle in my time. I'll 'ave a ribbon on Sunday as near the colour and shine of 'er ladyship's hair as money can buy, and Sail'll wish 'er'd never been born. I'll Sim 'er.”

With this terrible threat she flounced out of the room, and I laughed and wondered who and what 'Sim' was. A decent fellow and a good tradesman, I hoped, and wished him pluck and luck.

While I was tidying myself up, my mind was busy with the strange tangle things were got into. The mysterious Master Freake, after turning the Mayor into his pliant tool, had apparently disappeared. The Colonel had not breathed a word of explanation, and seemed to feel so secure that he was dawdling in the town as if no enemy were at hand. Of the state of affairs in the town itself I knew nothing. The one clear thing was that I had got my neck right into the noose, and Brocton could, and would, pull tight at the first opportunity. What did all this matter? What did any untoward event or result matter? I was going to be a soldier, and, after the fashion of love−lorn Cherry−Cheeks, I said to myself, “I'll Jack him!” I was going to be near Margaret, and, so rejoicing, bethought me of the hapless Roman's “*Infelix, properas ultima nosse mala.*” And what did that matter either? I rubbed myself the colour of a love−apple, humming the while old−time ditties long since driven out of my head by the Latin rubbish. Jack was right. Of course it was rubbish. “Latin be damned,” said I gleefully. “Nothing counts but life and love.”

There was more than a pinch of swagger in me as I made my way back to the passage overlooking the yard. Arrived there, I cautiously opened the nearest lattice and peered out. The inn−yard was dark and silent, and I was on the point of closing the window when I heard the clatter of hoofs on the stone−paving under the archway. A moment later a man on foot came in sight, and was followed into the yard by two men on horseback, one of them in charge of a led horse.

At once all was bustle. Ostlers ran up with lanterns, and the host came forward, candle in hand and a multitude of words on his tongue, to order things aright.

The man afoot was Master Freake, and it was clear that the riders were men of his, for I heard him ask them if they were quite clear as to their instructions, and both answered respectfully that they were. I could see they wore swords and that their horses were splendid, powerful animals, not much inferior to Sultan himself. Who and what was this man—“plain John Freake,” as he called himself,—who carried large sums of money, domineered over self−important burgesses and mayors, who was served by such well−appointed horsemen, whom Master Dobson, a parliament man, feared, and my Lord Brocton had thought it worth while to attempt to put out of the way?

It was a riddle I could not read, but as I stood there, peering round the half−open lattice at the scene below, I was happier than ever I had been in my life. “Poor old Jack,” said I to myself, “sweating and swearing over your riff−raff dragooners, and here am I, who envied you yester−morn, on the top rung of life.”

“We shall get it if we're late,” said Mistress Margaret playfully in my ear. “Not because dad worries whether he eats or not, but because he's so strong on mil−it−ary dis−cip−line.” I write the words so, as a poor, paper imitation of the mincing gait she could put into her speech, which was ever one of her delightfulnesses. “You'd have been the better,” she went on, “for a bringing−up on a troop−sergeant's switch. See what it's done for me!”

So she challenged me to admire her, and indeed I think that the witch was verily bent on casting a spell over me. No words can paint her as she stood in the dim−lit passage, the infinite sum of womanhood, peerless in every grace and gift; not now the tense, proud Margaret of the quick rebuke and the shattering sarcasm, but the mirthful, trustful, grateful companion of our boy−and−girl escapade.

“I think you're right, madam,” said I. “Bloggs, dear old chap, flogged the meaning of Virgil into me, but I wish he had flogged in some of the meaning of life along with it. I feel as helpless as Saul would have felt with David's sling and stones.”

“Are you as one fighting a Goliath?”

“I am,” said I, not able now to speak lightly, and not daring to look at her. Could any enterprise be more hopeless than the one my heart, against all the strivings of sense and reason, was beginning to set me? Through the open lattice I watched the flicker of lanterns in the yard, where the horses were being upped and whoaed stablewards.

“You will favour me, sir, with your escort into supper,” said Margaret.

This brought me to myself with a jerk. I closed the lattice, offered her my arm, and we walked towards the guest−room where the Colonel was awaiting us.

“I think you'd better revise your knowledge of the Scriptures, Master Oliver,” said she very quietly as I led her into the room.

“In what respect, Mistress Margaret?”

“You seem to have an imperfect recollection of the way in which Goliath met his death. It's idle to say we're late, dad, when supper's not yet served.”

He exploded into words I did not understand. “It's all right, only French,” whispered Margaret mischievously. “It means 'name of a dog.' I could swear better myself.”

“That's right,” stormed the Colonel. “As fast as I curse soldiering into one ear of him, you coax it out of the other! I'll be thankful when you're under Mother Patterson's wing in Chester.”

The coming of Cherry−Cheeks and one of the hard−favoured maids with the supper, followed by our host with the wine, followed in turn by Master Freake, put an end to my first lesson in soldiering and the imprecatory wealth of continental languages, and straightway the host slopped over with apologies for the delay in serving the supper.

“Things are a bit upset in the town, y' mun know,” he said, “and every wench in the 'Rising Sun' 'as been a devil unknobbed all day. This red−faced hussy here, when 'er was wanted to set the table, was off to see if that spindle−shanked Sim across at the Mayor's was safe and sound. And besides, my lady and y'r 'onours, the famous steak−and−kidney puddin' o' the 'Rising Sun' must be boiled to a bubble or it's dummacked. If one got spiled, the news 'ud run down to Chester and up to London in no time, and the 'Red Lion' 'ud get all my customers. His Grace of Kingston put up at the 'Red Lion' in all innocence until his worship, for old friendship's sake and a bottle of brandy, 'ticed 'im over 'ere to one of my puddin's. 'E started an inch off the table and ate till 'e touched, as we say in Staffordsheer, and then sent for 'is baggage, and 'as lain 'ere ever since in the great bedchamber over y'r yeds, an' I'm thinking to call it the Duke's Room an' charge sixpence extra for it. It's worth another sixpence to sleep in the same bed as a duke's slep' in. If it ain't, by gom, I'd like to know what he is for. Damn if y'r can tell by lukkin' at 'im.”

What I have for convenience' sake set down here as a continuous speech addressed to us all, was really a series of remarks addressed to whichever of us appeared for the moment to be listening, and broken by commands, scoldings, and threats addressed to the women. The tail−end of his remarks made me cock my ear, for it indicated that we were at the centre of the danger zone.

“If I were you,” interposed Master Freake at last, “I'd coax Prince Charlie to sleep in it and then charge a shilling extra. A prince, and my dislike of his ways doesn't unprince him, is surely worth twice as much as a duke.”

“Swelp me bob,” cried the delighted host, slapping his thigh in high glee, “that 'ud be better than a murder. It's wunnerful how a murder 'elps a 'ouse. Tek the 'Quiet Woman' o' Madeley. There was a murder there, and a damn poor thing of a murder it was, nothing but a fudge−mounter cuttin' a besom−filer's throat; poor wench, 'er lived up on th' Higherland yonder, and I'll bet it was wuth two−and−twenty barrel of beer to owd Wat. A murder's clean providential to a pub—”

“Damn, get out,” vociferated the Colonel, “or I'll provide the murder and you the corpse.”

The meal, be it said, was thoroughly good in every way. I'm not the man to despise my belly, and I don't hold with those that do. There are better things in life than steak−and−kidney puddings, but my experience is they want a lot of finding. The Colonel would not hear of any talk about our affairs till supper was over. “I dare say you're

all agog to know what I've been doing and what we are going to do," he said to me. "That's because you're a youngster at everything and a mere infant−in−arms at soldiering. When you've had a month's campaigning you'll know that the only things really worth bothering about are supper and bed."

To my great content he immediately fell head over heels into argument with Master Freake, something about bounties on herring busses, if I remember aright, and Margaret and I were left to each other, and a rare treat I had in hearing her lively talk and watching her glowing beauty.

At last, with almost a sigh of satisfaction, and then with a mischief−glint in her eyes, she said, "The pudding has been very good, but I prefer ham and eggs, provided that the right person cooks them."

"I should agree," I replied, "with one other proviso."

"To wit," said she, with a glass of wine half−way to her lips.

"That the right person saves them from frizzling to a cinder."

She sipped her wine steadily, and then, leaning forward till the radiance of her yellow hair made me quiver, she whispered calmly, "Oliver, you're a brute."

"Nay, madam," said I, "only a yokel."

She looked at me again as she had looked at me when I had kissed her hand beneath the hawthorns.

"Hello, there," broke in the Colonel, addressing himself to me, "who was right about the dog's life?"

"I was, of course," said Margaret promptly.

The host was rung for, his supper praised to his heart's content, the table cleared, and a dish of tea ordered for Margaret. Bethinking me of the sergeant's tuck, which might be useful, I asked the host to bring it up, and he did so.

When we were again left to ourselves, the Colonel took the sword, and examined it with his skilful eyes and practised hands.

"Somewhat heavy," said he, "but well balanced and well made, and of the truest steel. Are you a swordsman, Master Wheatman?"

"I never had one in my hand in my life till to−day," was my reply.

"Gird him for the wars, Margaret," said he. "So much of the ancient rules and customs of chivalry as can be observed in these mechanic days shall, by us at any rate, be observed. In strict law you ought to have spent a night in prayer and fasting, but your loyal service to Margaret is a good equivalent. To labour is to pray, say the parsons, and, my lad, always remember in your soldiering that a so−minded man can offer up a powerful prayer between pull of trigger and flash of priming. Kneel, Oliver, and in God's sight you shall be more truly knighted than any capering and chattering of German Geordie's can contrive."

And so, in the guest−room of the "Rising Sun," I knelt to my sweet mistress, and, before God and in the presence of Christopher Waynflete, Colonel of Horse in the service of the King of Sweden, and John Freake, citizen of London, Margaret, gravely and serenely beautiful, touched my shoulder with the sword and then girded it upon me.

"Sirs," she said, addressing her father and Master Freake, "the accolade has never been given to a worthier." Then, bending swiftly as a swallow dips in its flight over the meadows, she whispered emphatically in my ears, "Yokel it no more!"

CHAPTER XIII. PHARAOH'S KINE

“And now to business,” said Master Freake.

“To pleasure, sir,” said the Colonel. “Business is over.”

He was leisurely filling his pipe, an example which Margaret, with a smile and a nod, gave me permission to follow.

“Tell us how you escaped,” said Margaret. “Master Wheatman cannot too soon begin to learn the tricks of the trade. Sorry, dad,” bending to kiss his hand; “you needn't look at me in German. I mean rudiments of the profession.”

“A woman who calls soldiering a trade ought to be forcibly married to a parson,” said the Colonel passionately.

“There'll be a reasonable quantity of parsons to choose from at Chester,” she retorted, laughing up in his face.

“Chester? Why Chester?” demanded Master Freake, suddenly tense and vigilant.

“I need name no name, but a certain dignitary's lady there, one of our supporters, undertook to take her in charge while this affair was on,” explained the Colonel.

Master Freake, it seemed to me, was disappointed with the explanation, and, knowing that what Margaret wanted was to have the rumour of her father's intended treachery blown to pieces by his own account, I said, “There's only one parson in England fit to look at Mistress Margaret, and he's sixty and married. Let me learn, I pray you, sir, the art of slipping out of the hands of a squad of dragoons on a road crowded with soldiery.”

“If you think you are to hear a tale that will make you grip the arms of your chairs, you're in for a sad disappointment. Yesterday and through the night, they stuck to me as if Geordie had offered thirty thousand pounds for me, dead or alive, but this morning their hold on me slackened. They might have intended me to escape. I was put on a fresh horse, about the best they'd got; the dragoon in charge of me was three parts drunk when we started; we got mixed up in a crowd of foot retreating south, and separated from our main body, and finding myself alone on the road with one man, and him drunk, I just knocked him off his horse, and cleared off across the fields.

“I rode on until I got a sight of this town, and the main road into it, from a hill−top, and watched for an hour or so to see what was happening. I knew by my pace that I was well ahead of my late escort, and seeing no signs of them, came on to this inn, and was enjoying a good dinner when I saw Sultan and Oliver on him. The rest you know. Not much of a tale. Madge has done better many a time.”

“Do you really think the Captain intended you to escape?” It was Margaret who asked the question, looking intently at me as she spoke.

I looked from her to Master Freake and back again, meaning to remind her that I wanted no convincing, but she still kept her eyes on mine, her chin cupped in her long white hands, and I was glad of her insistence for I could look at her without offence. I thought the mellow fire−light made her look more beautiful than ever. The lustrous yellow hair shone like molten gold, and the dark blue eyes became a queenly purple.

“If it were done on purpose it was done cleverly,” continued the Colonel, “for the chance which set me free came quite naturally. The horse I rode yesterday was wanted in the usual way by a trooper to whom it belonged, and where so many men were more or less drunk, the choice of my particular drunkard was certainly accidental. And, besides, what possible motive could there be in letting me escape? Brocton knows I'm an experienced soldier of great repute—I state plain facts—and am eagerly expected by the Prince and by my old companion−in−arms, Geordie Murray. They couldn't have planned it better if they had wished it, but it's absurd to say they wished it. There ought to be a cashiered captain and a half−flayed dragoon somewhere south of us. Damme, I merit that at least.”

He bent over the hearth to relight his pipe. Master Freake smiled and rubbed his hands gently. Margaret's eyes blazed with triumph, and challenged me, still me, to share it. Woman−logic was clean beyond my poor wits. I was sick for action. These glorious interludes with Margaret gave me no chance. It was like setting me afire and asking me not to burn.

Thinking of the poor, half−flayed devil behind us, made me think of the sergeant, and I asked Master Freake,

“Did you give the sergeant his papers and letter?”

“No,” was the ready reply. “The papers dealt rather frankly with certain regimental accounts, and, since the sergeant is now very bitterly set against us, may be useful in my hands. I had a shrewd notion that the letter concerned the title to certain lands as to which Lord Brocton and I are at odds, and on opening it I found to my satisfaction that I was right. With your permission, Oliver, I will keep it.”

“By all means do so,” said I, anxious to burn again, and turning back to Margaret. If this silent, capacious man, so great a stranger yet so clear a friend, had said that the letter was about a new edition of Virgil, I should have believed him, and also, I fear me, have been equally uninterested. Latin be damned!

“Something for you in Oliver's magic−hat,” said Margaret smilingly to Master Freake. “He really must fetch something out for himself soon. Staffordshire is by far the most delightful country I have ever been in. Only one little day has gone by, and in that day Staffordshire has given me more and truer friends than Europe gave me in ten years. I shall cross its borders with regret. Shall we make the most of it while we have it and sleep here, dad?”

“Unless we're routed out,” was his reply, “and I do not think we shall be, for the enemy have all cleared out of the town. Cumberland is, of course, doing the right thing. He had few men north of Stafford, and fewer still worth powder and shot. Where the Prince is I've no idea.”

“Resting for the day at Macclesfield,” said Master Freake, “and his plans are not certain, or, at least, not known. The Duke of Kingston has a small body of horse at Congleton and is watching his movements.”

“Damme,” the Colonel broke in, “I did not know we had enemies north of us. Are you sure?”

“Certain. One of my men reported the facts to me just before supper.”

“It's awkward, or rather will be awkward if anyone who knows me turns up. That rascally landlord of ours must have known where Kingston was, but amid all his talk he never told me that. Damme, somebody's got hold of him. Still, you can't take the bull by the horns till his nose is slobbering your waistcoat, so pass the wine, Oliver.”

He refilled his glass and then, leisurely and with his eyes dreamily fixed on the fire, loaded his pipe with a new charge of tobacco, and went on smoking.

“Are you a Jacobite?” suddenly asked Margaret, looking inquiringly at Master Freake.

“Dear me, no, Mistress Margaret,” was the frank reply. “But you need not curl those sweet lips of yours, for neither am I a Hanoverian.”

“Then what are you?” she asked again, with the same uncompromising directness.

“A Freakeiteian,” said he with a smile.

“It puzzles me,” was her brief comment.

“Let me explain,” said he simply. “A Jacobite wants Charles to win; a Hanoverian wants George to win; a Freakeiteian wants to know who is going to win.”

By this time Margaret was no more puzzled than I was. Yesterday when I stood on the river−bank watching my cork, I cared not a rap whether George or Charles won, and that was an understandable position; but why a man should be spending money in handfuls, and roughing it in the wilds of Staffordshire, merely in order to know who was going to win, was beyond my poor wits.

“You do not understand?” he said.

“No,” said Margaret and I together.

The Colonel took no notice. He was puffing away at his pipe, long−drawn−out, solemn puffs, and gazing at the fire in a brown study.

“Well, Margaret and Oliver,” said Master Freake, “this is no time to be giving you lessons in the way the great world wags that neither knows nor cares of outs and ins and party shufflings, but is busy with rents and crops, and incomings and outgoings, and debts and credits, and wivings and thrivings. But, believe me, in being anxious to know who is going to win, I am as plainly and simply doing my duty as is the Colonel who is going to do his best to help his Prince to win. I am one, and, I thank God, not the least, of that great race of men who are destined to mould a mightier England than the sword could ever carve—the merchant of London whose nod is his bond.”

He spoke with simple dignity and his word was established. I had trusted him on sight. “His nod was his bond.” You saw it in the man's clear, steady eyes and knew it by the set of his firm, square chin. After a warning glance at the silent Colonel, he leaned forward, and Margaret bent to meet him.

“If Charles loses,” he murmured, “many heads will be smitten from their shoulders.”

The colour left her cheeks instantly and tears welled forth from her eyes.

“But not the Colonel's,” he whispered.

I was watching her with the eye of a hawk. A smile dawned on the white face, the sad eyes began to lose their gloom, and my fool of a heart began to flutter.

Yet once more he whispered, “And not Oliver's.”

She leaned farther forward still and kissed him.

And it was just at that moment that the door opened smartly and Cherry−Cheeks put her sweet head round it and swiftly and peremptorily beckoned me outside.

Margaret laughed.

In the dim passage, Cherry−Cheeks caught my hand affrightedly and babbled, “Oh, sir, there's the ugliest beast you ever saw spying on her ladyship. Take your boots off, sir, and creep after me!”

I tugged them off and we started. Along the passage she flew and upstairs into the corresponding passage above. Here, outside the Duke's room, she stopped and whispered, “He'll think I'm that bitch Sal. Hide behind me!”

She opened the door and stole into the room with me in tow, holding her skirt and crouching down nearly to the floor.

She was somewhat broad in the beam, like a Dutch hoy, and all I could see was a dull glimmer somewhere ahead in the darkness.

“Ssss−h, damn ye,” said the beast fiercely. “Stand still!”

Cherry−Cheeks took care not to stop till near the light, and then, with wonderful ready wit, put her right hand on her hip and I peeped through between arm and waist.

Full length on his belly lay the man from Yarlet Bank. There was a small spy−hole in the floor, on the edge of the hearth, and he had his right ear against it, which was lucky, for it kept his face turned from me. The notebook lay open on the floor near a guttering tallow candle in an iron candlestick, and the stump of pencil was clenched in his dirty yellow teeth.

I threw my handkerchief on the floor, took my fat little Virgil in my left hand, and crept out to him. When near on top of him, I gripped him round the nape of the neck, digging my fingers in his flabby throat, and he went slimy with fright like a great, fat lob−worm. I swooped down on him with my full weight, and pinned him to the floor. His big mouth opened as he fought for breath, and I clapped the Virgil hard and far into it, tying it tight in with my handkerchief, and gagging him effectually.

I looked up and found, to my relief, that Cherry−Cheeks, like a sensible girl, had crept out of the room, and her share in the affair was never even suspected.

Drawing my tuck, I touched the back of his neck with the point. He flinched and squirmed, great drops of sweat larded his nasty face, and I knew the fear of death and hell was in his marrow.

“Do exactly what I say,” I whispered, “or through it goes. Understand?”

He could hardly nod his ugly head for the trembling of his body, and I fairly dithered as I knelt on him. I made him rise, and then caught hold of the skirt of his coat. Holding him by it at arm's length, I stuck my point to his neck again, and said, “Forward.”

I marched him downstairs and along the passage. There was great risk of being met by some one, and it was the most anxious time I had had since the affair with the sergeant in the house−place at the Hanyards. Oddly enough, as I drove him along, the thought came to me of the bygone days when Jack and I had played horses just like this at the Hanyards, and when my prisoner stuck a trifle at the door of the guest−room, I growled at him, “Come up!” It was a strange trick of the mind. To me he was just play−horse Jack dawdling to look at ten−year−old Kate feeding her chickens.

I got him in unseen without and unnoticed within, for the Colonel and Master Freake were again at their arguments of state, hammer and tongs, and they minded the click of the door behind them no more than the crack of a spark at their feet. Indeed the Colonel said “Pish!” with great vehemence, and Master Freake's “My dear sir!” had a shake of pepper in it. As for me, I like a man who, when he gets into a thing, gets into it up to the neck.

Margaret added to my amusement, for as I pricked my prisoner on into the fire−light, and peeped over his shoulder, he being a good six inches shorter than I, madam leaned forward and became absorbed in the high debate.

“I beg to report, sir,” said I, as indifferently as I could manage to speak, “the capture of a spy.”

“Hang him at daybreak,” said the Colonel, without so much as looking at him. “Pish, man, the trade in salted herrings is no more a nursery of seamen than I'm—Damme, what's this, Oliver? Damme, it's Weir. Your servant, Mister Weir, and I shall vastly relish seeing you strung up.”

I gave a brief account of where and how I had found him, making no mention of our helpful girl friend, but pointing out that he had co−scoundrels at work for him in the inn.

“Another good piece of work, Oliver,” said the Colonel. “I like the way you use your available material. I've seen many things used as gags, but not a book before; yet it makes a very good one. Keeps him quiet as a stone and withal leaves him free to lick up a few crumbs of learning.”

Margaret had not looked at me yet, and indeed seemed bent on keeping her face, heightened in colour by the warmth and glow of the fire, turned away from me. Now a rather big matter had come into my mind, so I said urgently, “Name of a dog,” and thus shook her into looking at me. Whereupon, I pointed first to Mr. Freake, then to the spy, and wagged my head sagely. Her quick mind saw at once that I was afraid that our friend would be compromised if we were not careful. She promptly said something to her father in an unknown tongue, and by the cock of his eye I knew he'd taken the point.

“My good friend,” he said, “pray step over to his worship the Mayor and ask him to come over and commit this rascally spy to the town jail. Say, I beg, that I am grieved to have to disturb him, but His Majesty's servants must ever be at the disposal of His Majesty's affairs.”

I grinned behind the spy's back at this masterly way of getting George's servant to do James's work. Master Freake started at once, and, stepping with him to the door, I whispered, “Give us fifteen minutes.”

“Right!” he whispered back again. “Look in your holsters!”

As soon as he had gone, the Colonel ordered me to guard the door, and this gave me the chance of putting on my boots again. The Colonel, cutting off with his sword a good length of bell rope, made a swift and most workmanlike job of tying the spy into a knot. He then opened the window, and, Margaret taking my place meanwhile, he and I cautiously bundled Weir on to the balcony, shut down the window, and left him safe and silent.

“Be in the porch in ten minutes, Margaret, ready to start. Oliver, get the horses there ready in that time. You ride the troop−horse, and Freake has provided a mare for Margaret. Quick's the work and sharp's the motion!”

Margaret and I started together to carry out our orders. Once in the passage we had to go different ways, and I bowed and was going mine without a word, when she put her hand on my arm and stayed me.

“I'm sorry you've lost your Virgil,” she said.

I wondered, as already so many times I had wondered, at the somersaults of feeling she was capable of. Where was now the Margaret of the short, disdainful laugh? Not here, in the twilight between the bright room and the black yard. Here was a subtle, mysterious Margaret, half regret and half caprice, with one thought in her eyes and another on her lips.

“So am I, madam. I wish it had been Kate's cookery−book.”

She would have mastered me had I stayed another second. I bowed again and left her.

And this is, perhaps, the best place to say that I did not lose my Virgil after all. Here it is on the table as I write, still the dearest of all my books. On each side of the healing an irregular curve of teeth−marks cuts into the yellowing parchment. Dear, brave Cherry−Cheeks sent it home by the hands of a vagrom pedlar, laboriously and exactly writing on the package the inscription she found on the fly leaf:

OLIVER WHEATMAN, Esquire,
of the Hanyards,
Staffordshire,
Aetatis anno 13

I routed out ostlers, and by dint of a judicious blend of cursings and bribings had the horses ready under the archway in time. Margaret was there waiting, with our pretty maid fluttering around her. The Colonel was within, settling with the word−warrior host. I helped Margaret into the saddle and led her horse into the street, turning its head northward. In a moment, her father clattered after her on Sultan. I went back to smile farewell to Cherry−Cheeks and deal out my bribes, but was after them before they had trotted a stone's throw.

They were cantering towards the bridge by which the high street of the town crosses a tiny streamlet and again

becomes the high road to the north−west. It was only a pistol−shot from the portico of the “Rising Sun” to the hither side of the bridge, where a group of townsmen were collected round a man with a lantern. We had ridden forth into a strangely quiet town, but before I was half−way to the bridge, and not yet settled down to my saddle, loud shrieks rang out behind me. Looking back, I saw a woman leaning forth, candle in hand, from the Duke's bedroom window. She waved her light and yelled as one distraught. There was no mistaking what had happened. Sal, the sour−faced hussy who wanted me hanged, had learned the fate of the spy. Folks rushed from all quarters to see what was the matter. The sooner we were well out of it the better, and I pricked on to overtake the Colonel and Margaret.

I was near on them at the bridge, where the gossips had lined up to watch them pass. Timothy was there, thankful for once, I thought, of his long coat, while the man who held the lantern was the man to whom I owed a drubbing. I wondered what he was doing there with a lantern, for it was a brilliant moonlight night, and, since he made to run townwards as soon as he saw who was passing, I felt in my bones that he meant mischief and was probably in league with the spy. I turned my horse at him before he was clear of the bridge and tumbled him back headlong on Timothy, who yelled the most astonishing yell I ever heard, snatched the lantern out of Beery Breath's unresisting fingers, and with it smashed into him with such a fury that he beat him to his knees.

I laughed, for the man had got his drubbing after all, through me if not by me. As for the other townies, they enjoyed it like a play.

“Gom!” said one. “He's trod on Tim's gammy toe.”

“Damn if he don't turn on 'is missus when 'er does that,” said another.

The Colonel and Margaret were looking back when I drew level.

“Anything the matter?” he asked.

“The spy is discovered, sir,” I said.

“Does that mean harm to Master Freake?” inquired Margaret.

“Not it,” replied the Colonel. “He's got the Mayor in his pocket. Do you know this country, Oliver?”

“No, sir,” was my answer. “Only in broad outline. This is the main road to Chester, and away on our right is an open country running up into roughish moorland and hills. Leek lies that way on the Derby road to London. The country to our left I know nothing about.”

“Then we'll stick to the main road as long as possible and stop at the first inn after all danger−spots are behind us. Sorry to turn you out, Madge, but it was impossible to stop once Weir found us out, since Kingston and his men might have turned up at any moment, and then we should have been done for. All we have to do is to get north of him. From the south we have nothing to fear now. Brocton's dragoons would have turned up hours ago if there was any intention of trying to recapture me. Freake had sent one of his men down the road to give us time to clear off if Brocton did pursue. That was why I was content to stay on at the inn.”

“Weir knows who you are, sir, I take it?” said I.

“Exactly. He's a notorious Government spy, and is busy here worming into our local plans. There are plenty of the honest party hereabouts, and especially over to the west there in Wales.”

“Are we still in Staffordshire, Master Wheatman?” asked Margaret.

“Oh yes, for quite a distance ahead,” I replied.

“The spirit of prophecy is upon me, gentlemen,” she said merrily. “Our Staffordshire luck is not yet out, and this time it's Master Wheatman's turn.”

“Well, then, Master Wheatman shall ride ahead and scout for it. About thirty yards, Oliver. Keep your horse well in hand, and be all eyes and ears. Damn this moon! It picks us out like three crows on a field of snow, and this infernal road's as straight and level as a plank. Ride in any available shadow!”

I went ahead and set them an easy pace. Work had begun again, the work of my heart's desire, and all along the Chester road there was no blither spirit than mine that night. I was astride a flaming sorrel, no match for Sultan, but still a good sound horse. He knew I was his master and so I made him a friend, patting his neck, crooning to him, and giving him a lick of sugar out of my hand. The danger we were in was like wine to my heart. Enemies ahead and enemies behind, and this bare, bleak, moon−smitten road between. Now and again, for remembrance' sake and the joy of it, I cocked my ear to pick out the patter of Margaret's mare from the heavier, longer strides of Sultan. Yes, there she was, doubtless murmuring Italian love−ditties to her happy inmost self and thinking of —Pshaw! This was romancing, and another's romance at that, and it deadened me against my will,

while here was a man's work to do. So I turned to it and lived.

I examined the holsters, according to Master Freake's orders. I found a pair of pistols which, even in the pale moonlight, looked what they indeed were—handsome, accurate weapons, the best work of the best gunsmith in London. I was the equal of most men with the pistol, and usually had, indeed, a capital pair at the Hanyards, but Jack had taken them off with him on his dragooning. Over and above the pistols and their ammunition I found a sizeable leathern bag, and the feel of it to my fingers showed that it was chock−full of money. When I did turn it out next day, I found near on sixty pounds, mostly in guineas and half−guineas, and a note:

"Dear lad, this town is very bare of guineas and many of them are lighter than the law alloweth, but you shall have more as occasion offers.—Your friend, J. F."

I turned to the road again with a merrier heart than ever, for I thought, as Smite−and−spare−not would have thought before me, that the very handiwork of God Himself was here displayed, in that the seemingly most untoward events of our journey had been turned into means of strength and assurance. Had I, as I ought to have done, brought money of my own from the Hanyards, I should never have started highwayman, and so never have met Master Freake on Wes'on Bank.

Three miles or more we made in this manner, and I had heard nothing more alarming than the hoot of an owl from an ivy−crusted elm. Some distance back the road had climbed slightly for a space, then fallen into the level again, and now ran, open and unhedged, across the bleaky top of a barren upland. I chirruped to the sorrel and gave him another lick of sugar to comfort him. A moment later, I knew by the forward cock of his ears and the swift up−shake of his head that something was in the wind, and strained my own ears to listen, for there was nothing of note visible ahead or around.

From far ahead came the faint rattle of hoofs on the hard road. I pulled up, and, a moment later, Margaret and the Colonel stopped beside me.

"What is it?" asked the latter.

"Horse coming this way, sir," was my reply. The sounds were already plainer. For a full minute he listened carefully. "A good number of them, and making a smart pace," he said. "It can only be Kingston's advance guard falling back. Most likely the van of the Highlanders has beaten up their quarters. Once past them we shall be—Hello! Slids! What's that? Reinforcements! Egad. Oliver, we're between the hammer and the anvil."

He turned his head round sharply and so did Margaret and I. From behind us came again the unmistakable rattle of a body of horse. We were trapped completely.

"This is damned annoying," said the Colonel. He looked casually around, as indifferently as he would have looked round the guest−room of the "Rising Sun," and added, "Follow me, and ride as if the devil were at your tail."

He turned off into the bare, flat country, and we after him. How we rode! He was making for a little group of trees, some dozen wind−sown pines, stuck like a forlorn picket in enemy country a stone's−throw from the road. We got there in a bunch, for there was no time for Sultan's pace to count.

"Damn the moon!" he said, and dismounted. "But this is better than nothing. Take off Margaret's saddle, Oliver."

I got down, and assisted Margaret to dismount. She thanked me, briefly and smilingly, as unperturbed as the gaunt pine beneath which she stood.

The Colonel and I changed the saddles, and in a few seconds Margaret was on Sultan. I asked him in vain to take the sorrel and leave the mare to me, for she was getting restive, and the Colonel was not quite so able as I was with a strange horse. I insisted, however, in taking off my coat and wrapping it about the mare's head, and, being thus blanketed, she gave us no further trouble. By the Colonel's orders, Margaret, on Sultan, took her place between us, heading for the open country, while he and I turned to the road. The thin, straggling pine−branches cast but little shadow, and I knew it was next to impossible for us to pass unnoticed.

"Now, Madge," said the Colonel, "it's bound to come to a fight. As soon as the fun begins, off you go like the wind into this bog−hole in front of you, and in five minutes you'll be out of danger. Make a detour round to the road again, keep the moon behind your back, and push on to the nearest inn. Oliver and I will join you there, if so God wills. If we don't, you're on the Chester road. Have you your money still?"

"Yes, dad."

"You understand, Madge?"

“Quite clearly.”

“Then kiss me, sweetheart.”

She kissed him without a word, and turned to look goodbye to me. For a moment I went all aquiver with emotion. This wonderful new life of mine had at times to be lived in the outskirts and suburbs of death. Fortunately, a thought came into my head, and I tugged out the leathern bag and thrust it into her hand.

“Don't leave that under the bed,” said I, and, being very bold, as one may be with death at one's door, I drew her gloved hand, with the bag in it, towards me, and kissed it. She said nothing to me, but the light in her eyes was like moonlight on the dancing surface of a mountain spring.

“Look to your pistols, Oliver,” ordered the Colonel briefly and crisply. “See your tuck slips easy in the scabbard. Another minute will decide. You and I can easily give Madge all the start Sultan requires.”

“Easily, sir,” I answered stoutly.

“Good lad!” said the Colonel.

And Margaret, leaning across until her lips were near my cheek as I bent to see what she wanted, said, for the third time, “Well done, fisherman!” I laughed lightly and was glad, for was not this calm, brave, splendid woman thinking of how we two had met?

From the first cock of the sorrel's ears to this so characteristic remark of Margaret's could not have been five minutes, and now, although owing to the downward slope to our left I have mentioned, and its corresponding slope to the right, neither body was yet in sight, they were so nearly on us that differences between them became obvious. The southern troup was small, was not travelling beyond a smart trot, and was, so far as the men were concerned, absolutely quiet. The body from the north was large, was forcing a hot gallop, and much noise and shouting came from the troopers.

It was plain that we were in for it. The men from Newcastle were no doubt coming north as a reinforcement, but it was absurd to suppose that they had not been told of our doings and of our escape northwards. They had not overtaken us, and we must be on the road somewhere. The men from the north had not met us. Never since the world began had two and two been easier to put together. There was only one place for us to be in and this was it. A short parley, a glance our way, and an overwhelming force would dash at the picket of pines.

The bare road lay there in the moonlight, half a mile of it in clear view on either hand. The two bodies came in sight within a few seconds of each other, and the Colonel snapped his fingers and chuckled.

From the north a wild rush of spurring, flogging, shouting, cursing horsemen, about a hundred of them. No order, no discipline, no soldiership —nothing but mad haste and madder fear.

The mare began to plunge, and the Colonel, leaping off, nearly strangled her in the coat. The sorrel got uneasy but gave me no real trouble. Sultan took not the slightest notice of the din behind him, and leisurely cropped the tough bussocks of grass at his feet.

I looked to the road again. The southern body was small, not more than a score, compact, riding smartly but with military order and precision. The man at their head, the officer in command, no doubt, spurred on and began to shout at the oncoming northerners. He might as well have spoken fair words to an avalanche, and the men behind him began to waver and most of them pulled up. It was useless. The torrent swept into them and bore them backward, tumbling some of them over, men and horses together, but incorporating most of them in its own madness. In less than five minutes the last batch of dragooners had cursed and spurred themselves out of sight, and the bright moon shone down on a road once more bare and white save for a few scattered patches of black.

The Colonel uncovered the mare's head and nuzzled her. All he said was, but that very gleefully, “Geordie, my boy, I'll be routing you out of St. James's within the fortnight. I'll learn you to neglect the King of Sweden's Colonels! Damme, Oliver, it made me think of Pharaoh's kine—one lot eating the other up. Now, sweetheart my Madge, we'll have your pretty eyes a−bye−bye in no time.”

“I never saw anything so funny in my life,” said Margaret. “On with your coat, Oliver, before you take cold.”

From all of which I learned to take, as they did, the fat with the lean in soldiering, and not to care a brass farthing which it was. Still, I was as yet so young at the game, that, though I was careful to swagger it out and say nothing, I did wonder why the body from the south was so small.

And I wonder as I write whether it was or was not the mistake of my life merely to wonder then.

CHAPTER XIV. “WAR HAS ITS RISKS”

I slept unsoundly and in snatches. Margaret was in the room beneath me, “dreaming in Italian,” thought I, in unhappy imitation of her dainty gibe at her father. A problem was on my mind, and that was ever with me an enemy to sleep. I meant being the best of soldiers, and this that worried me was a military problem. To be short, I could not help asking myself, “Were the dragoons from the south intended as a reinforcement to the horse from the north?” And somehow I could not think they were. As the top−dog spirit in me put it: “It was like sending Jack to reinforce me. *Quod est absurdum*.”

Time the Explainer permits me to be frank. There was this other side to my problem that I could not bring myself to be sure the Colonel's escape had come merely by happy chance. He was no party to contriving it, of that I never doubted, but it did look like a contrivance. We had been at the “Rising Sun” for six hours or more. Stone, the nearest head−quarters of Cumberland's forces, was only nine miles south of it, yet no attempt had been made to follow the fugitive. No, thought I again, that's wrong. Weir was sent on his track and actually found him. But this was as useless, so it seemed, as sending twenty dragoons, hundreds being available, to reinforce a thousand stout horse. There was no proportion between the ends proposed and the means adopted.

If the handful of dragoons were not a reinforcement, it was a pursuit of us, and this posed another problem. Why had the pursuit been allowed to flag all the afternoon and evening, to be taken up again far on in the night? What fresh fact, if any, had determined it? I could think of none, nor, on reflection, was one wanted, since both Master Freake and Jack had last night witnessed to the worn−out state of Brocton's horses. Consequently his dragoons would have been sent after the Colonel earlier had they been fit. Their coming, when fit, proved their anxiety to retake him. Therefore he was not allowed to escape, and the conclusion of my argument hit its major premise clean in the teeth.

“Oliver, my boy,” said I to myself, “say a bit of Virgil and go to sleep. These matters are beyond you.”

I picked on a passage and started mumbling it to myself. It was a lucky hit, for when I had in solemn whispers rolled off the great lines in the sixth Aeneid which foretell the work and glory of Rome, I thought of my Lord Ridgeley, thiever by cunning process of law of most of my ancient patrimony, and his blackguard son, my Lord Brocton, lustfully hunting the proud, gracious woman beneath, and I said grandiosely to myself, “Rome's destiny is thine too, Oliver Wheatman of the Hanyards, and these betitled scullions are the proud ones you shall war down.”

The notion was so soothing that I fell asleep again.

I have leaped over uninteresting but by no means unimportant events. We were staying the night at a wayside hostel, called the “Red Bull,” situated at the point where a cross−road cut the main road. We were still in Staffordshire, a matter on which Margaret had laughingly placed the utmost importance, though an urchin, standing by the rude signpost, could have flung a pebble into Cheshire. Houseroom was of the narrowest, and I was tucked away in the attics, in a room I had to crawl about in two−double, walking upright being out of the question. It was the grown−up daughter's room, and she had been bundled out to make place for me, a fact I did not learn till it was beyond need of remedy. The lass had a good pleasant woman to mother, but her father, the host, was an ill−conditioned, surly runt, whose only good point was a still tongue.

Margaret was in the room below, and her father next to her along a narrow gangway. From my attic I got down to this gangway by means of a staircase hardly to be told from a ladder. The gangway, just past the Colonel's door, became a little landing whence three or four steps led down to a larger landing, from which one could mount up to the other and corresponding half of the house or descend to the entrance hall with which the various rooms of the ground floor connected.

I awoke again in a dim dull dawn. Tired of these bouts of wakefulness I got off the bed—for I was lying full−dressed even to my boots—and crept softly to the window. I would keep watch and ward for Margaret, as a true knight oweth to do. Then, if my obscure misgivings were unfounded, I should at any rate have done my duty.

There had been a slight fall of snow, enough to cover the ground and bring everything up into sharp relief. My window was a dormant−window, its sill being about four feet from the eaves. I flung it open, careful not to make a sound, pushed out head and shoulders, and took stock.

I dipped my fingers in the snow and found there was near an inch of it. The “Red Bull” stood back from the road, and on each side of the inn proper, outhouses and stables jutted out to the wayside. Drawn up under a hovel on the left was a huge wagon piled with sacks, probably of barley bound for Leek, a town renowned for its ale.

Without was silence and stillness, as of the grave, and it was nipping cold, but my mind was happily busy, having so many delicious moments to live over again. If by some unhappy chance I never saw her again and lived to be a hundred, I should never tire of my memories. She had as many facets as Mr. Pitt's diamond, as many tones as the great organ in Lichfield Cathedral. To know her had enriched my life and opened my mind. What Propertius had said of his Cynthia, I repeated to myself of my Margaret, *Ingenium nobis ipsa puella est*. 'My' Margaret! Well, it did her no harm for me to think it, and, after all, the sly, silly babblings of my under−self could be shouted down by the stern voice of common sense.

Here, under the stress of a new force, my thoughts flew off at a tangent, and I said to myself, “Bravo, Romeo! You shall find me a rare Juliet.”

I had, indeed, much ado to keep from laughing aloud, as my situation was delicious, not to say delicate. For, on a sudden, noiselessly as the beat of a bat's wing, two feet of ladder had shot up above the eaves, and even now an ardent lover was hasting aloft, dreaming of lispings and kissings to come. I mustn't frighten him too soon or too much or he'd drop off, but as soon as he was fairly on the slope he should sip the sweetness of lips of steel. So I crept back, got a pistol, and stood to the left of the window.

I waited till his body darkened the room and then took a furtive look at him. It was no village lover climbing up at peep of dawn to greet his lass. It was one of Brocton's dragoons, one of the five who had been at the Hanyards.

In a twink I shot him. Without a word, he slithered down the tiles, leaving a mush of blood−red snow. His right leg slipped aslant between two rungs of the ladder, and his body, checked in its fall, swung round and dangled over the eaves.

In the room was a large oaken clothes chest. I dragged it to the light, tilted it on end, and jammed it into the gable of the window, which, luckily, it fitted completely, and so blocked any further attack from the roof. Snatching up my weapons, I tumbled down the ladder, only to hear the heavy tramping of feet upstairs. Standing by Margaret's door, I waited until the head and shoulders of the first man came in sight. He carried a lantern, and its yellow rays lit up for me the ugly face of the sergeant of dragoons. I fired my second pistol at him, crashing the lantern to pieces. Down he went, whether hit or not I did not know. In the darkness I heard the rush of a second man who came on so fearlessly and fast that he was far into the passage before I met him with a fierce thrust of my rapier. I thrilled with the zeal of old Smite−and−spare−not as, for the first time, I felt the point of my rapier in a man's body, and drove it home with a yell. Down he went too, with a gurgle of blood in his throat, and Margaret, coming out of her room, stumbled over his body as she raced after me along the passage.

The Colonel was at the stair−head before me, but there was, for the moment, no work for him. The enemy had tumbled noisily downstairs into the hall, and were collecting their scattered wits after their first rout. To my regret, the raucous cursings of the sergeant showed that he had not been killed and apparently not even hit.

“God damn ye!” he yelled. “Ten of you driven back like sheep by a raw youth. I'll settle with ye for it. Think I picked ye out of the stews and stink−holes of London to stand this? There isn't one of ye with the guts of a louse. I'll take the skin off the ribs of you for this, damn ye, and most of your pimp's flesh along with it!”

“What sort of guts was it brought yow tumblin' down so quick?” put in the surly voice of the landlord. “Yow cudna 'a come any faster if yer blasted yed 'ad been blown to bits instead of my lantern.”

Some of the men laughed at this, whereon the sergeant blasphemed enough to make a devil from hell shiver. He cowed the dragoons, but the innkeeper only growled, “A three−bob lantern blown to bits! Fork out three bob!”

“I'll have him if I have to blow the house to bits!” vociferated the sergeant.

“Fork out three bob!” repeated the host.

Not a word had passed between us on the stair−head, and now, at the sound of preparations for a fresh assault, the Colonel took each of us by the arm and led us into his room.

“The stair−head cannot be held against fire from the opposite landing,” he whispered.

When inside, he locked the door, and I helped him pile the bed on end behind it, heaping all the other furniture against the bed−frame to hold the mattress and bedding up against the door. Margaret, at a brief word of command, had meanwhile kept watch through the window.

“That's a fair defence,” he said contentedly. “What are these devils?”

“Brocton's dragoons,” said I. “I've settled two of them, one on the roof and one in the passage.”

“Good lad! Ten of 'em would be long odds in the open; here we ought to have the laugh of them. Load your pistols! Damme, it's a bit chilly. Fortunately there's some warm work ahead.”

He stamped up and down the room, swishing his arms round his body, and stopping every now and again to make some trifling change in our hurriedly contrived barricade. Margaret stood by quietly at the window, and when I had reloaded my pistols, I joined her there.

The ladder had been shifted and now lay along in the snow. There, too, lay the body of the dragoon I had shot, crumpled up in his death−agony. A brood of owls were clucking and cluttering about under the hovel, and there, too, leaning against the rear wheel of the wain, were a lumpish wagoner and our surly host. The one was stolidly smoking, the other was holding the battered lantern out at arm's length, and I could, as it were, see him growling to the lout at his side, “'Ew's to fork out for this'n?” A girl went towards them from the house, circling, with averted head, far round the dead dragoon, bearing them from the kitchen a smoking jug of ale.

“In England,” said Margaret, “snow adds the charm of peace and purity to the countryside. There's never, I should think, enough of it to give the sense of utter desolation and deadness that it gives one in Russia.”

“It's so uncertain with us,” was my reply. “I've known a whole winter without a snowflake, and I've walked knee−deep in it in May.”

The Colonel stopped his marching and swishing and came to the window.

“Don't bother, Madge,” said he. “We'll pull through. Hallo, I didn't see yon wagon last night.”

He took out his snuff−box and, hearing the noise of the enemy in the corridor, walked with it in his hand across to the door. He tapped his box with accustomed preciseness, but I, a step behind, having lingered for a last look into Margaret's eyes, heard him mutter, “Damn the wagon!”

“Ho, there within, in the King's name,” shouted the sergeant.

“Ho, there without, in the devil's name,” mimicked the Colonel.

“I want speech with Colonel Waynflete,” shouted the sergeant.

“Then, seeing that Colonel Waynflete cannot at the moment give himself the pleasure of slitting your ruffian's throat, you may speak on,” was the reply.

“You and your daughter may proceed on your way unharmed if you surrender. It's only Wheatman the farmer, now with you, that I want.”

He could be heard all over the room to the last syllable, and Margaret quickly left her place at the window and came towards us, but the Colonel in a stern whisper ordered her back. “How dare you leave your post! Watch that wagon!” She crimsoned and returned.

“If Master Freake were here, Oliver, I think he would remark that there was no market for colonels to−day,” said her father to me with a wry smile. He gave the lid of his snuff−box a final tap, opened it, and held it out to me. In the sense of the term known to fashionable London, he was not a good−looking man, but as he stood there, waiting gravely while I took my pinch, he had the irresistible charm of the highest manliness.

“Do you agree, Colonel?” bawled the sergeant.

“I do not,” he shouted, and took his snuff with great relish.

“By God,” and now the sergeant roared like a wounded bull, “I'll have you all in ten minutes.” Then, as an afterthought, he added, “Here, I say, you Wheatman, do you agree?”

“Certainly,” said I, “I'll come at once.” And I should have gone, there and then, but for the Colonel, who, as I laid a hand on the nearest piece of our barricade, promptly said, “I've only one way with deserters,” and levelled a pistol at my head.

“For Margaret's sake, sir,” I pleaded in low tones. “Let me go!” She had flown like a bird across to us, and so heard me.

“I had hoped you thought better of me, Master Wheatman,” she said coldly, and went back to her watching.

The sergeant heard, or at least understood, what had been said in the room. We heard him say, “You know your job. Fifty guineas for Wheatman, dead or alive. Any man who touches the girl will be flogged bare to the bones.” Then we heard him walk off along the corridor.

The dragoons without made no attempt on the door, and we joined Margaret at the window. Hardly had we got there when half a dozen dragoons dashed out of the porch and ran for the road. The Colonel flung the window

open and emptied both his pistols at them, but they zigzagged like hares and the shots appeared to be thrown away. In the road they halted, formed a line in open order, and levelled their carbines at the window. All three of us moved aside, the Colonel tugging Margaret with him to the right while I hopped to the left.

"Take it easy, Oliver," he said very good−humouredly. "Until they think of the wagon we're safe enough on this side. These walls would almost stand up to a carronade."

With a clash the first bullet came through the window and knocked a huge splinter off a bedpost. There were six shots without, and six bullets spattered in a small area opposite.

"That's quite good shooting," said the Colonel. "Much better than I expected from such poor stuff."

I told him what Jack had said about the mixed quality of Brocton's dragoons. These good shots, I explained, were picked men off the Ridgeley estates, probably gamekeepers and bailiffs.

"Very like," he said. "They're used to shooting but not to fighting. Rabbits are more in their line."

There was no stir in the passage, and I wondered what the job was these men had in hand. The fusillade at the window was kept up unceasingly, generally in single shots, sometimes in twos and threes. The barricade took on a ragged appearance. I occupied my mind in thoughts of Margaret. She was in the corner, beyond her father.

The bullets had by now nearly cleared the window of glass, fragments of which covered the floor of the room. Through the cracking and spluttering we at last heard the noise of a wagon moving. The Colonel and I leaped up and peered round the edge of the window. It was being pulled by two horses, and was shifted till it was exactly opposite the window, and to my surprise some twelve feet distant. The sacks made a firm platform level with the window−sill. Flush with the window it would have made an admirable means of attack, but why the space between?

While the wagon was being put in position, there was a cessation of firing. We saw the six dragoons from the road climbing on to the wagon, while as many again joined them from the inn. The Colonel said, "Now's our chance!" and fired carefully. One man, who was poised on the rear wheel, fell into the road and hopped round to the back of the wagon holding his right foot in his hand; another, already mounted, sprawled full length on the sacks.

"That's the way," he said, with much satisfaction, and stepped aside to reload. "See if you can improve on it."

By this, under orders from the sergeant, two or three dragoons were creeping under the wagon to fire from behind the wheels. I dropped a man standing at the horses' heads and then, in the nick of time and on second thoughts, made sure of the mare and hit her in the neck. She squealed, kicked, and plunged, and the other horse sharing her fears, they began to drag the wagon off. The sergeant and two or three men leaped at them and managed to quiet them, and then took them out of the traces to save further trouble of the sort. The Colonel, meanwhile, having reloaded, brought down another dragoon with one shot, and ripped open a sack with another. It was barley.

For perhaps a minute the window had been as safe as her corner, and Margaret had been quietly watching the scene. Now, with seven or eight men lying on the top of the sacks, with a stout row of them piled in front as a bulwark, it was time for us to run to cover again. This time, of her own accord, she came my side, and nestled beyond me in the nook between the wall and my body.

The men in the passage still made no sign.

"Slids, Oliver," said the Colonel, "I can't see this ugly devil's game yet, but, whatever it is, you came near to spoiling it. Damme, it was a good idea to pepper the horse. Curse me! Where were my fifty years of soldiering that I couldn't think of it?"

"I suppose it comes from my being—"

The sweetest and whitest fingers in the world closed my mouth, and Margaret, thinking that I was on the verge of backsliding, whispered in my ear, "The readiest−witted gentleman in England."

I tingled with the joy of her touch, and turned to her so that I might go on into the coming fight with her last shade of emotion burnt into my memory. A stream of lead poured through the window, but the spluttering of bullets on the walls of the room had no more effect on me than the pattering of hailstones.

"May I finish my sentence, madam?"

"Not as you intended, sir."

"I can't go back on old Bloggs' teaching, madam."

She pouted and frowned, both at once, and the Colonel bawled through the noise of the fusillade, "Being

what?”

“Fond of Virgil,” roared I back again.

Margaret laughed. Could a nightingale laugh, it would laugh as Margaret laughed then.

Before the music of it died away the sergeant showed his hand, and death at its grizzliest grinned through the window. A great mass of damp, smouldering straw, lifted on pikels, was thrust into the window−frame, filling it completely, and thick wreaths of dense, foul smoke eddied into the room, while through the straw the rain of bullets poured on, smashing and splintering on walls and ceiling, door and barricade.

The Colonel slashed and poked at the straw with his rapier. Telling Margaret to crouch on the floor, I crawled on my belly and fetched the bed−staff, which stood in its accustomed corner of the chimney−piece. It made a much more serviceable tool for the job, and I flung it across to the Colonel, who seized it and worked it like a blackamoor till he was almost the colour of one, and had, to judge by his voice and demeanour, got almost beyond his German in his rage. Asking for Margaret's handkerchief, I tied it loosely round her mouth, my heart near to bursting as I looked into her calm and patient face. Then I lay down flat and wormed out into the room and, after a hard struggle, wrenched off one of the rods which carried the rings of the bed−curtains. I remember that, as I lay there, writhing and struggling, I counted the bullets, eleven of them, as they spattered about me. However, I got back to Margaret's side untouched, and poked and thrust and slashed to make a hole near her face between straw and window−frame.

Our efforts were practically useless. The straw was cunningly fed from below, and the pall of smoke was now so heavy and dense that the fringe of it was settling down on Margaret's tower of yellow hair, and as I watched the rate at which it was falling, I knew the end was coming. The Colonel had worked with the energy of despair to tear down the vile enemy that was killing us by inches, and now suddenly collapsed and fell like a log to the floor. Margaret would have crawled to him, but I kept her by main force against the wall while I wriggled out of my coat.

“We have one chance left, Margaret,” said I. “Your father is only overcome by the smoke—see, there's no sign of a wound about him—and his fall is a godsend. Give me your other handkerchief and lie down flat, face to the floor and close to the window, and listen for my next instructions.”

She did so without a word. I wrapped my coat loosely about her head, and before I could close it in the smoke cloud was settling down on her, even as she lay. I was nearly done for, but she was safe for a few minutes. Lying full length on the floor, under the window, I tied her handkerchief to the end of the curtain−rod, thrust it through the straw, and waved it about as vigorously as I could.

The sergeant's voice rang out. The firing ceased. The foul masses of straw were removed. Then the scoundrel came forward and leered up at me.

“Do your terms hold good?” I shouted.

“Yes,” he said.

“Colonel Waynflete and his daughter will be left at liberty to go their way, if I surrender?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Then in one minute I'll be with you,” said I. Stepping inside the room, I first of all pulled the Colonel to the window, tore loose the clothes round his neck, and laid his head on the window−sill, in the good sweet air. Then crawling to Margaret, I unwrapped the jacket, and said briefly, “Force some of Kate's cordial down your father's throat. Goodbye!”

I returned to the window, clambered out, hung at arm's length, and dropped to the ground. Striding up to the sergeant, I said carelessly, “Your turn this time, sergeant. To−day to thee, to−morrow to me—it's neater in the Latin but you wouldn't understand it—and all Brocton's dragoons shan't save your ugly neck.”

“Where the hell's your coat?” he demand fiercely.

A cool question, indeed, after trying to suffocate me, but it was never answered. The air was on a sudden filled with the weirdest row I had ever heard. It was as if all the ghosts in Hades had suddenly piped up at their shrillest and ghostliest. This was followed by a splutter of musketry, and this again by loud yells. Looking round I saw a swarm of strange figures sweep into the yard, half women as to their dress, for they wore little petticoats that barely reached their knees, but matchless fighting men as to their behaviour. On they came, with the pace of hounds, the courage of bucks, and the force of the tide.

It was the Highlanders.

The sergeant fled into and through the inn and, with the men from the corridor, got clean away. Not a man else escaped. Half the dragoons on the wagon were picked off like crows on a branch. The rest, and those in or about the yard, got their lives and nothing else barring their breeches, and that not for comeliness' sake but because they were useless. Every man jack of them, in less than five minutes, looked like a half−plucked cockerel, and their captors were wrangling like jackdaws about the plunder.

I glanced at the window. To my relief, the Colonel was already sitting up, pumping the sweet air into his befouled lungs, and Margaret smiled joyously and waved her hand to me. I was waving victoriously back to her when my attention was forcibly diverted by two Highlanders, who collared me, intent on reducing me to a state of nature plus my breeches. There was no time to explain, neither would they have understood my explanation. One of them, a son of Anak for height and bulk, already had his hands to my pockets. Him I hit, as hard−won experience had taught me, and he fell all of a heap. His fellow was struck with amazement at seeing such a great beef of a man put out of action so easily, and stood gaping over him for a while. Recovering himself, he snatched a long knife out of his sock and made for me murderously, but I had meantime fished out a guinea and now held it out to him. He took it with the eager curiosity of a child, looked at it wonderingly, made out what it was, and then ran leaping and frisking up and down the yard, holding it high over his head, and shouting, “Ta ginny, ta ginny, ta bonny, gowd ginny!”

I was saved further trouble by the approach of one of the officers, or, to speak with later knowledge, chiefs, of these wild warriors. He informed me in excellent English that he had heard the firing, seen my parleying at the window and my subsequent surrender, and desired to know the meaning of it all.

“The gentleman at the window,” I explained, “is Colonel Waynflete, travelling to join Prince Charles. The lady is his daughter, and I am their servant, by name Oliver Wheatman of the Hanyards. These King's men, belonging to my Lord Brocton's regiment of dragoons, attacked us; we refused to surrender, and the rascally sergeant in command smoked us out. I pray you, sir, to run the wagon up to the window that I may hand them down, since the door is heavily barricaded.”

It was done immediately, and he and I ran up to the window together.

“You young dog,” said the Colonel. “You surrendered after all.”

“In strict accordance, sir, with military usage, I used my discretion as commander of the party.”

“Slids!” His grey eyes had the old laugh lurking in them already. “Commander of the party?”

“There were only Mistress Margaret and I left,” said I.

“And the peppermint cordial,” put in Margaret.

So in sheer wantonness of joy we sought relief in bantering one another. Then I introduced the chieftain, who had stood there silent and graceful, a fine figure of a man, finely and naturally posed, and mutual compliments and thanks passed between us. Yet in that first minute, with Margaret and the Colonel perched on the sill, and the Highlander and I standing on the sacks of barley, I saw another thing happen, for the big things of life come into it with the swiftness of light and the inevitability of death. A chieftain proudly climbed the wagon; a bond−servant humbly handed Margaret down. As was fair and courteous, and suitable to my real position, I let him do it, and aided the Colonel, who was as yet somewhat shaky. After seeing him safe down, I rushed up again and recovered our weapons and my coat. Down once more, I was getting into my coat when Margaret, who was talking to the Highlander, looked at me and said quietly, “Pray, Master Wheatman, fetch me the domino from my room!”

She said it simply and mistress−like, and of course I shot off to do her bidding. I supposed, as I went, that it was the white snow all around that had brought out the blue in her eyes so vividly.

In the inn I found the host, the lantern still dangling from his finger, notwithstanding his greater woe, and his pleasant, placid wife weeping bitterly. Of the original twenty guineas of the Major's, I now had only four left, and these I thrust into her hand as I passed, and told her to be comforted.

From my shooting the dragoon on the roof to my running upstairs for the domino was in all not more than twenty minutes. I skipped over the man who had fallen to my maiden sword. He was lying between the door of the Colonel's room and that of Margaret's, and opposite one of the doors on the other side of the passage. Darting into Margaret's room, I recovered the domino.

I was only a moment, but in that moment some one opened the door in the passage against which the man lay and so brought him into the light, and I could not help taking a look at him.

My heart stopped with the horror of it; my whole being fell to pieces at the agony of it. I remember running

from it as from the gates of hell. I remember reeling on the stairs. I remember a headlong fall. I remember no more.

It was Jack.

CHAPTER XV. IN THE MOORLANDS

I was in bed, there was no doubt about that, and a strange sort of bed too, for it moved lightly and deliciously through the keen, open air like the magic carpet of the Eastern tale. The bedposts at my feet were most curiously carved into life−like images of warriors, so life−like, indeed, that when the one on the right turned its shaggy head and spoke to the one on the left, I was not shocked and scarcely surprised. Bed it was, however, for mother's soft, smooth hand was on my cheek, and under the balm of its touch I went off to sleep again.

When my eyes opened again, the mists had cleared out of them and I was no longer in the land of shadows. The carven bedposts were Highlanders; the bed was a litter slung between four of them; the touch was hers. Somebody spoke, the Highlanders came to a halt, and Margaret bent over me. Her face was pale, grave, and anxious.

“Are you better, Oliver?” she whispered.

“As right as rain,” I answered, pushing my new trouble behind me and speaking stoutly because of the whiteness of her face.

“Try to sleep again. You've had a bad fall, and there's an ugly cut in your skull.”

“Indeed, I'll do no such thing,” was my reply. “I don't want carrying like a great baby, and I do want my breakfast. I'm as empty as a drum.”

“Can you stand?”

“Sure of it, and also hop, skip, jump, and, above all, eat and drink with any man alive. So, if you can make these men−women understand you, tell them I'm very grateful, but I've had enough.”

The four tousled warriors were easily made to understand what I wanted, and, stout and strong as they were, welcomed the end of their labours with broad grins of satisfaction. They lowered me to the ground, and immediately Margaret's hands were outstretched to help me to my feet. But for the black death between us, it would have been new life indeed to see the colour and sunshine creeping back to her face, and to hear her whispered “Thank God!”

My head was bumming and throbbing, but nothing to speak of. The gash was behind and above my right ear, so I must have somersaulted down the stairs. Margaret, as I learned later, had bathed and bandaged the wound, and after my recovery of consciousness, it only gave me the happy trouble of persuading Margaret that it gave me no trouble.

I stamped and shook myself experimentally, took a few strides, and jumped once or twice, Margaret watching me as curiously and carefully as a hen watches her first chicken.

“Do mind, Oliver!” she said. “It bled horribly, and you'll start it again.”

“I believe I needed a blood−letting,” said I.

“Should you ever need another,” she said crisply, “I hope you'll take it in the usual way. How did it happen?”

I had steeled myself for the inevitable question, and so answered ruefully, “I must have tripped over the domino.”

“If it were not your mother's I would never wear it again,” she said, plucking the skirt of it into her hand and shaking it as if it were a naughty child. “I thought you would never come round. For nearly an hour, I should think, you looked stone−dead. Then you just opened your eyes, but closed them before I dared speak, and lay so at least another hour. You have given me such a fright, sir, that, now you are up and about again, I'm beginning to feel I have a grievance against you.”

“I'm sorry, madam,” said I, very soberly.

“Now you're laughing at me, sir,” was the brisk reply.

The word made me shiver. “Laughing”—over Jack's body! Margaret was in her stride back to her mistress−ship again yet her eye changed instantly with her mood when she saw me wince. Indeed, her mind flashed after my mind like a hawk after a pigeon, but I dodged the trouble by looking casually around to examine our whereabouts.

We were following a track down a dip in an open moorland. Across the shallow valley, and climbing the slope ahead of us, was another small body of Highlanders, whom I took to be our scouting party. The sun was a dim

blob in the sky, and I saw from its position that our direction was easterly. A joyous hail from behind made me spin round, whereupon I saw the Colonel on Sultan and the young Chief on the sorrel turning the brow behind us. It took them a few minutes to trot down to us, and before they reached us four more wild warriors, our rear−guard apparently, came in view. One of them was my son of Anak, astride Margaret's mare, and so looking more gigantesque than ever.

“Good morning, commander!” was the Colonel's greeting. “Slids! But I'm glad to see you on your feet again. How's the head?”

“It still bumbles a bit,” said I, “but, truth to tell, I'm thinking more of my breakfast than my head. I'm as empty as a drum.”

“It's a guid prognostick to feel hungry after sic a crack o' the head,” said the chieftain, smiling, and I thought with a twinge what a handsome, wholesome sight he made.

“I'm another drum,” said the Colonel, “but deuce take me, Oliver, if I know how we're to be filled. Madge would have us start off with you at once, quite rightly too, and we'd neither bite nor sup before we took the road.”

“And where were you taking me?” cried I.

“To the doctor's,” explained the Colonel. “There's one in a village tucked away somewhere among these hills, and we've a lad on ahead to guide us. Colonel Ker, who commands the Highlanders who rescued us, gave us our friend here, Captain Maclachlan in the Prince's army, and a great chieftain among his own people”—here the chief and I bowed to one another —“and a dozen or so of his stout men as an escort. Two plaids were knitted into a litter, a log of a man named Wheatman was bundled into it, and off we started breakfastless, as I said before.”

“I'm very grateful to you, Mistress Margaret,” said I.

“Don't be silly!” she answered very sharply. “It is no praise to tell me I acted with common decency. And you weren't bundled in!”

“I was not praising you, madam,” I retorted, quick as ever to return like for like. “I was thanking you, and I venture, with respect, to thank you again.”

“Bother old Bloggs!” she said, suddenly all of a glow.

“Bloggs? Who's Bloggs?” asked the Colonel, plainly enjoying the fun.

“A rascally schoolmaster,” she explained, “who flogged Oliver into a precision of speech which I find most trying. But I must not miscall the dear old man, for I stole his supper.”

“I wish he'd flogged him into precision on a staircase,” said the Colonel. “Damme, I am hungry.”

“I'm thinking there'll be a dub of water in the bottom yonder,” said the chieftain, “and Mistress Waynflete shall, if she will, take her first meal Highland fashion.”

As I firmly declined to be carried another yard, the Highlanders unmade my litter and resumed their plaids. In the trough of the valley we found a streamlet of clear sweet water, and our repast consisted of a handful of oatmeal, of which every clansman carried a supply in a linen bag, stirred in a horn of water. It was not our Staffordshire notion of a breakfast, but it was better than nothing.

“Water−brose is a guid enough thing at a pinch,” said Maclachlan to Margaret, “guid enough to take a big loon like yon Donald to London and back.”

Donald, it appeared, liked an addition to it, notwithstanding his chief's praise of it, for he was taking a long pull from a leather bottle. This, he explained, was usquebaugh, “ta watter of life,” and the spice of poetry in the description tempted the Colonel and me to try a dram. The Colonel probably had had worse drink in his time, but even he made no comment. I would almost as lief have had a blank charge fired into my mouth.

While we all took our brose, and Maclachlan squired Margaret, the Colonel told me how it had happened that the Highlanders chanced to come to our rescue in the very nick of time. My own trouble is to get my tale straight and simple, and I have no intention of making a hard task harder by trying to interweave with the threads of my own story a poor history of these important days. Mr. Volunteer Ray saw much more of these things than ever I did, and the curious reader may turn to his fat, little, brown volume for particulars. He was on the other side, and is too partial for a perfect historiographer, but the account of things is there, and reasonably well done too. But as what happened to Margaret, the Colonel, and me, happened because of the campaign of the rival armies, I must boil down what the Colonel told me if I am to make my tale clear. The Colonel, to his credit, as I think, was so enthusiastic over all matters military that he was rather long−winded in his account, and, in like fashion with our housewifely Kate, it behoves me, so to speak, to make a jar of jelly out of a pan of fruit, which is easier done with

crab−apples than words.

According to the Colonel, one of the master maxims of the military art is, “Find out what the enemy thinks you are going to do, and then don't do it.” My Lord George Murray, the Prince's chief adviser in military matters, had acted on this plan, and had given the go−by to the Duke of Cumberland in grand style. At Macclesfield, the traveller to London had choice of two high roads, one through Leek and Derby, and the other through Congleton and Stafford. Leaving the Prince at Macclesfield with the bulk of his men, Murray had pushed with a big force as far as Congleton on the Stafford road, and the news of his advance had made Cumberland withdraw all his northerly outposts to his head−quarters at Stone. It was the last body of horse, routed out of Congleton, which we had watched from the pines last night, racing in fear and disorder back to the main of their army. Before daybreak Murray had sent on a force of Highlanders under Colonel Ker towards Newcastle, to maintain the illusion that the Stafford road was the one the Prince would take, and the vanguard of this force, under Maclachlan, had saved us at the “Red Bull.” Murray himself was marching from Congleton across country to Leek, while the Prince was marching thither also from Macclesfield. Murray would be there first, and did not mean to wait for the Prince, but to push on as far as possible towards Derby. We, too, were bound for Leek, where we should be safe at last, and the end of the Colonel's explanation came, not because he had said all he could have said, but because Donald was yelling to the clansmen in preparation for our retaking the road.

Maclachlan accepted with alacrity an offer I made to go ahead and join our advance. He ordered Donald to accompany me, giving as his reason: “For he kens the English fine when the spirit of understanding is on him, and ye'll easy get it on him by raxing him a crack in the wame, same as ye did back yonder at the yill−house.”

The Highlander maintained the expression of a wooden doll throughout this explanation, but, as I leaped hard after him across the brook, I overtook a grin on his face that promised well for my future entertainment.

“She pe recovert,” he said. “Tat was a foine shump.”

Before I could reply Margaret was upon us.

“The mare is quite frisky. She thinks me a mere *fardello* after Donald. You're sure you're all right, Oliver?”

“So near right, madam, that I beg you not to worry about me further,” said I.

“Worry about you or worry you?”

It hurt me to have her go so chilly all of a sudden, but I replied frankly, “Both. It does indeed worry me to have you breakfastless in these wilds through my doings.”

“Yes,” she said, smiling down on me, “I ken fine the distinction between water−brose and ham and eggs.”

“We are still in Staffordshire,” I said cheerily, “and I'll go ahead and see what I can do for you. Now, Donald, your best foot first!”

He and I started ahead again, leaving her waiting for the rest of the party, detained by some explanation on the Colonel's part of the military aspects of the lie of the land.

“There's a wheen foine leddies wi' ta Prince, Got bless him,” said Donald, “but when yon carline gets amangst 'em she'll pe like a muircock amangst a thrang o' craws. She'll ding 'em a'.”

I expected that Donald would cherish ill will to me for my blow, but in this I was wrong. So far from bearing me a grudge, he quite obviously liked me for it. He had a fist, or nief, as he called it, nearly as big as a leg of lamb, and almost the first thing he did when we were alone was to hold it out, huge, dirty, and hairy, and put it alongside mine. He scratched his rough head in his perplexity.

“At Gladsmuir,” he said, “'er nainsell did take ten Southron loons wi' 'er own hant, wi' nobody to help 'er, an' now one callant had dinged 'er clean senseless wi' nothin' but a bairn's nief.”

“It wasn't clean fighting, Donald,” said I. “Nothing but a sort of trick. If you were to hit me fair and square I should snap in two like a carrot. Tell me how you captured the ten men!”

It was a longish story, at any rate as he told it, in quaint uncertain English, intermixed with spates of his own Gaelic as he got excited over the account of his prowess. One of them was an officer, and Donald finished up by ferreting out of his meal−bag a magnificent gold watch, lawful prize from his point of view, taken out of the officer's fob.

“Ta tam t'ing was alife when I raxed 'er out of 'is poke,” he said, “but 'er went dead sune after. She can 'ave 'er for a shillin'.”

He had no idea, nor could I make him understand, what it was and what purpose it served. When it had run down for want of winding, to his simple mind it had 'died.' He pushed it into my hand as indifferently as if it had

been a turnip, and I promised to pay him at Leek, for my pockets were empty again and Margaret had the bag.

"'Er nainsell wad rather 'ave a new pair o' progues," said he. "And what for does anybody want a thing tat goes dead to tell ta time wi'? T'ere's ta sun and ta stars, tat never go dead."

As we walked rapidly we overtook our party soon after settling the matter of the watch. The plough−lad who had been pressed as guide told me we were near the road to Leek, and I let him return. We dropped down to a rough road running our way, and a mile or so along it the roofs of a village came in sight, and we halted till the main body came up.

"What is it, Oliver?" asked the Colonel.

"Breakfast, sir," said I.

We marched into the village in military array. At our head strode Donald, stout of heart and mighty of hand, with two pipers skirling away at his heels, and the clansmen stepping it out bravely two abreast behind them. Margaret came next, with me at her mare's head, and the Colonel and Maclachlan brought up the rear.

Our arrival created as much stir as an earthquake. The Highlanders, in twos and threes, swarmed into the houses and ordered their unwilling hosts to prepare them a meal. That it was war I was engaged in was, for the first time, brought clearly home to me when I saw a fearsome Highlander, with claymore, dirk, and loaded musket, posted at each end of the village. A touch of ordinary human nature was, however, added, when the children, fearless and happy in their ignorance, sidled up to the sentries and stared at them as eagerly as if they had been war−painted Indians in a travelling show.

At first, we, the gentry for short, intended to seek accommodation in the inn, poor and shabby though it looked, and Donald was ordered thither to give instructions. The Colonel and the chieftain rode along the village to observe how things were going, and this left Margaret and me together, and spectators of a delightful little passage. For as Donald approached the inn−door, the hostess, a sharp−nosed, vixenish woman, charged at him with a very dirty besom and routed him completely. Truth to tell, Donald, who had the sound, sweet nature of a child, had all the natural child's indifference to dirt, but even he, long−suffering in such matters as he was, had to stop to scrape the filth out of his eyes. This gave me the chance of making peace, and I went up and explained that we should pay for everything like ordinary travellers, good money for good fare.

"Oh aye!" she said.

"Jonnock!" said I.

"You're a Stafford chap," she asserted.

"I am," I agreed, "and I'll see you done well by."

That settled her, and Donald was settled too, for his immediate wants were satisfied by a large glass of brandy, and those more remote by a bucket of water and a towel.

"Gom!" said the virile little woman to me, "a wesh'll do him no harm. I've got the biggest gorby of a mon," she went on, "between Mow Cop and the Cocklow o' Leek. He's gone trapesing off, with our young Ted on his shoulders, to see yow chaps march into Leek. There's about a dozen on 'em gone, as brisk as if they were goin' to Stoke wakes. Fine fools they'll lukken when they comes whom to−nate."

As it happened, the "Dun Cow" was after all left to Donald and the pipers. When I rejoined Margaret, she said, "Pray help me down, Oliver, and we'll find the doctor, and have him dress your head. And, once out of Donald's sight, I'll have the laugh that's nearly killing me to keep under."

I helped her down, and said, "Never mind doctor! That fine old church yonder must be well worth looking into."

"You will mind, sir," she flashed. She beckoned to Donald to take charge of her mare, and then waylaid a passing girl, running from one sentry to the other, and got her to show us the doctor's.

So we started thither, and as we went she said, "Really, Oliver, you are inconsiderate at times."

"Nonsense," said I. "It's my head."

I was angry, not at her words, for I knew she did not mean them, but at my inability to see what the fascinating jade was driving at.

"Inconsiderate," she repeated firmly. "You'd be content to be introduced to the Prince with a great swathe of dirty, blood−stained linen round your head, regardless of how it reflected on me."

"Reflected on you?" I echoed blankly.

"Yes. We shouldn't match. I suppose dear old Bloggs was a bachelor?"

“He was,” said I, resigning the contest in despair.

The doctor lived in a fair−sized stick−and−wattle house. He was a dapper little man, with a cleverish, weakling cast of face, and was all on the jump with the turn things had taken. He had just opened the door to us, and was eyeing us uncertainly, when the Colonel and the Chief, returning on foot from their inspection, having left their horses to be baited under the watchful eye of a Highlander, stopped beside us.

“Are you the doctor?” asked Margaret promptly, as if to forestall any backing out on my part. If I could have joyed at anything, I should have been overjoyed at her keenness in having me seen to.

“Yes,” he said, but very softly.

“Then please attend to this gentleman's wound,” she said.

“Is he a rebel?” he asked, so loudly that he might have been talking to some one across the street, and instinctively I turned round There, sure enough, was the parson, a pasty, pursy, mean−looking rogue, coming across to see what was doing.

“It's his head I want you to attend to,” retorted Margaret, “not his politics.”

“I doctor no rebels,” said he, louder than ever.

“Man,” intervened Maclachlan, taking a pistol from his belt, and emphasizing his words by gently tapping its barrel on the palm of his hand, “if in ten minutes yon head isn't doctored to pairfection, it's your own sel' will be beyond all the doctoring in England.”

“It's against all law,” said the doctor.

“I'm the law in this clachan to−day,” said Maclachlan simply, still tapping away with his pistol. Hearing the parson behind, he turned round and added drily, “And the gospel.” Hereupon the parson's face took on the appearance of ill−made, ill−risen dough, and he turned and slipped off with creeping, noiseless steps, like a cat.

“Come in,” whispered the doctor.

“Ye're a man o' sense,” said Maclachlan, and pushed his pistol back into his belt.

We all passed into the hall, and the doctor made the door carefully.

“That damned pudding−face is a Whig,” said he, “and so, of course, he's a Justice. The Squire's a Whig, and he's a Justice. Here am I, well−reputed in the faculty, and my wife coming of the Parker Putwells, one of the rare old county stocks—none of your newfangled button−men and turnip−growers —and I'm no Justice, because I'm a Church−and−King man of the old school.”

“They went out of fashion with flaxen bobs,” said I.

“Come on, my tousled macaroni!” said he. “There's nothing the matter with the inside of your head at any rate, though the outside looks as if you'd been arguing with the parish bull.”

“This is a verra fine house,” said Maclachlan slowly and slily.

“A mere dog−kennel,” said the doctor, “considering she's a Parker Putwell.”

“And I'm thinking,” said Maclachlan, very thoughtfully “that there'll be some guid victuals in the pantry and, mayhap, a gay wheen bottles of right liquor in the cellar.”

“Oh aye!” said he, taken aback.

“Then I'm thinking we'll e'en have breakfast here and try their merits. And if it's a guid ane, I'll see you a Justice, whatever that may be, when the King enjoys his own again. A Maclachlan has spoken it.”

The doctor went to an inner door and bawled, “Euphemia,” and a discontented wisp of a woman answered his call.

“Madam and gentlemen, my wife, Mistress Snooks, born a Parker Putwell. Mistress Snooks, like me, will bow to your will with pleasure, nor will you mislike her table, I assure you. Now, my buck, let's see to this crack in your head.”

He took me into his druggery, unwrapped the bandage, and examined my wound.

“So ho!” said he, “a right good sock on the head. How did it happen?”

I told him.

“It's lucky for you, my buck,” he said, “that you've got a baby's flesh and a tup's skull, and some one had the sense to wash the cut clean as soon as it was done.”

He set to work and made a good job of it, with a pledget of lint and strips of plaister, and meanwhile I speculated as to why, in all these bottles and jars and gallipots, neither nature nor art could contrive to store a drug magistral for the blow that had riven my heart asunder.

“That's better than two yards stripped off a wench's smock,” he said at last. “And a damnably fine smock too, you lucky rascal.”

He twittered a snatch of ribaldry that made my foot twitch in my boot. Behind his back, I pocketed the priceless relic, dank and red with my unworthy blood, and followed him back to the company.

We made a longish stay, and fared well at his table. The doctor was a good enough fellow in himself, but his wife, a salt, domineering woman, lived in the light of the Parker Putwells, and he, poor devil, in the shadow they cast. He was playing a double game too, for whenever the red−elbowed serving−wench came into the room, he roared his dissent from our lawlessness, and drank to the King with his glass over the water−bottle as soon as she went out. Once when she brought us a rare dish of calvered roach and, with wenchlike curiosity, lingered to pick up a crumb or two of gossip, we had a snap of comedy, for, in his play−acting, he would take none till Maclachlan, to keep up the farce, thrust a pistol at his head and forced him. Whereupon the maid, in plucky fashion, threw a cottage loaf at Maclachlan and took him fairly in the chest. The doctor, to his credit, rose to protect her, but she braved it out. She would, she averred, lend the thingamyjig a better petticoat than the one he'd got on. “If he mun wear 'em,” she added, “he mought wear 'em long enough to be dacent.” The doctor bustled her out at last, palpitating but triumphant.

Maclachlan had sprung up like a wild cat when the missile hit him. Luckily he was flustered by the bouncing of the loaf on the table and off again clean into Margaret's lap, or the ready trigger would surely have been drawn in earnest. Then Margaret promptly took the edge off his anger by saying with menacing sweetness, “I'm sorry the fun has gone further than was desirable, but I will not have the girl blamed for what was in her a brave deed, nor suffer any unpleasantness here on account of it. Pray be seated.”

This ended the matter, and Maclachlan, with a wry smile, settled down again to his fish.

“It was a verra guid thing after a' said,” he explained, “that it wasna my mouth, for it was an unco' ding. I'm half hungry yet, and, to be sure, breakfast and broillerie gang ill together.”

It was well said, and Margaret rewarded him with a smile and engaged him in merry conversation. The Colonel, who had kept silent during the trouble, now plied the doctor with questions about the surrounding country.

“It's a poor biding−place for a Parker Putwell,” he replied. “If there's a drearier or lonelier stretch in England than the moorlands of Leek, I would not care to see it. I go miles on end about it to visit my sick folk, and mostly in a day's riding I see nobody but a stray shepherd, a flash pedlar twanning his way across country with his gewgaws, and now and then a weaver scouring the outlying cottages for yarn.”

When the meal was over Maclachlan insisted on paying for it, and bestowed a shilling on the loaf−thrower. In theory, I found, the clansmen paid for what they had, and Donald, being quartermaster to the party, was very busy discharging his obligations up and down the village. The only cause of dissatisfaction, but that not a slight one, was his Scots mode of reckoning, in which a pint was near on half a gallon, while his shilling was a beggarly penny. It always took a whirl of his dirk and a storm of Gaelic to convince a cottager of his accuracy, but he got through at last, and we reformed our order of march and started for Leek.

This time I took the sorrel and Maclachlan marched beside Margaret on her mare, for the Colonel wanted to give me an account, derived from the young Chief, of the Prince's marchings and victories. The Highlanders being astonishing foot−folk, and the Colonel being full of analogies and digressions, the tower of Leek church came in sight before we had got the Prince out of Edinburgh.

A halt was called to discuss what was to be done. The Colonel dismounted, and we followed his example. Margaret, I noticed, coloured slightly as Maclachlan lifted her down. She had been as cool and unfluttered as a marble image when she lay in my arms. Maclachlan was for marching on into the town, and the doubt on the Colonel's face rather nettled him.

“The considerable town of Manchester,” he said, “was entered, and in part seized, by one Scots sergeant and his drummer. Of a certainty near a score of Maclachlans can intake yon little clachan.”

“Of a certainty,” retorted the Colonel, “Margaret and one of your pipers would be enough if we only had the townspeople to consider. There's no game much easier than walking into a lion's den when the lion isn't there, but it's pure foolishness to play the game till you're sure he's not at home.”

“Lion! What's to do here wi' lions?” asked Maclachlan.

“As I'm only a volunteer,” answered the Colonel, “and not yet a man of authority under the Prince's

commission, which you are, I must ask your leave to explain that our getting into Leek is a military problem. I grant ye it's a little problem, since it wouldn't matter a pinch of snuff if we marched in and every one of us was promptly hanged in the market−place. But I undertook to make Oliver here a soldier, and, damme, what you want to do isn't soldiership, and he'll only learn soldiership by mastering the little problems first."

"Like sums at school," said I, whereat Margaret laughed aloud.

"Damme, you young rascal," stormed the Colonel, "if I'd got my commission in my pocket, I'd put you under arrest for impertinence."

"With great respect, sir," I answered, "I beg to say that I understand that, at a council of war, the youngest officer gives his opinion first."

"That's bowled you over, dad," said Margaret cheerfully.

"Damme, I'll bowl you off to Chester to−night," he retorted. "As sure as a gun's a gun, you'll ruin Oliver. Stop grinning like an ape, sir, at that jade's tricks, and listen to me."

"I'm thinking, sir," said Maclachlan, "that in my present responsible position I would greatly value your observations on the matter in hand."

This was a clever remark so far as the Colonel was concerned, for he would have talked to a viper about soldiering, but Maclachlan did not see, and I did, the delicate little mouth that Margaret made.

"My observations are simply these," said the Colonel: "We do not know where Murray is, we do not know where the Prince is, and we do not know where the Duke of Devonshire is. Any one of them may be in Leek."

"And who may be the Duke of Devonshire?" asked the chief. "I've never heard of him."

"One of Geordie's dandiprats, who has got together a big force of militia at Derby, and who, if he's any pluck, may have forestalled us all by marching to Leek."

"It's sair awkward," said Maclachlan, completely taken aback by the news.

"It is so," said the Colonel, "and seeing that Oliver knows the rules and procedures of courts martial, he shall deliver his judgment first."

"Sir," said I, bowing low, "I would, with respect, suggest...."

I got no further, for Donald, who was within a yard of my elbow, suddenly bounded into the air and let off a most astonishing yell. Then he ran up and down, like a foxhound after a lost scent, gabbling away in Gaelic. The clansmen put their hands to their ears, and their ears to the wind, listening intently, whereon Donald ceased his capering and chattering, and called out to us, "Ta pipes! Ta Prunce! Ta pipes! Ta Prunce!"

"Whist, ye auld fule," said the chief. "Ye're enough to deafen a clap of thunder."

"I'm telling it ye, ta pipes! ta Prunce!" he babbled, and then fell still, and we all listened.

The clansmen must have had ears like the bucks of their own mountains. I could hear nothing but the soft sough of the breeze as it swept o'er the rank grass of the moorlands, but they, Maclachlan as madly as any of them, yelled their slogan, and the pipers filled their bags and blew fit to burst. Like was calling to like across the wilds.

Margaret glowed with enthusiasm, and the Colonel's eyes sparkled as he handed me the box for the customary pinch—a courtesy, I found by later experience, he conferred on very few. Indeed, in my new trouble, the kindness and affection of the Colonel were becoming my best stand−by.

"The great game's afoot, Oliver," he said.

"And we'll play it to the end, sir."

"Good lad," said he.

"Donald, ye auld skaicher," said Maclachlan, "get your bairns agait. The Maclachlans are going to be last, where they should be first, at the intaking of a town, but the Prince, God bless him, will think me balm in Gilead when he sees the reinforcements I bring."

He was in high feather, and it interested me to watch in another the tonic effect of Margaret's presence. I took no advantage of my capacity as her body−servant, but leaped into my saddle and sat the sorrel like a wooden image as he dodged about to get her horsed again and ready for the road. He was, indeed, fit to serve a queen; the Highland fashion marvellously well set off the clean, strong lines of his body, and the single eagle's feather in his bonnet was the right sign to be waving over him. The top−dog spirit was fast oozing out of me, and I sat there sourly dusting the skirts of my poor country−tailor−made coat.

The men were lined up on the rough moorland track, Donald at their head, and the two pipers filling their bags

and fingering their chanters behind him. Maclachlan took Margaret's rein and began to lead her mare up the slope of the path, but the Colonel called to him and diverted his attention, and she stopped beside me.

"Oliver," she said, "you must let me have your coat for half an hour when we are settled in the town, so that I can mend it. The holes in it make me shiver every time I see them."

"You are very kind, madam," said I, still dusting away, lest she should see how my hand trembled.

"Oliver!"

She forced me to look at her now, she spoke so peremptorily, and when the blue eyes met mine they were so clear and intent that I feared she might read my secret.

"Smile!"

Smile! I was to smile, was I? And when our Kate got the news at the Hanyards, the smile would die out of her eyes for ever, for Jack, dear, splendid Jack, was the weft that had been woven into the warp of her being.

"I do not smile to order, madam," said I.

She flicked the mare sharply and cantered up to the level, whither Maclachlan raced after her with the speed of a hound.

CHAPTER XVI. BONNIE PRINCE CHARLIE

On our way into the town a thing happened which greatly shook me, being, as I was, nothing in the world but a small farmer who had never seen the wars. At a point where the rough road cut across a fold in the moorlands we saw, half a mile to our right, a herd of cattle being lashed and chivvied away to the remoter crannies among the hills by a throng of sweating hinds and fanners. Had it happened our way, thought I broodily, Joe and I would be there among the like, saving our own stock from the marauders. Donald looked at them longingly, but our haste brooked no delay, and besides, as he put it to me later, “It's a puir town, but, after a' said, better than a wheen lousy cattle, for I've come by a fine pair o' progues for a twa−three bawbees.”

Leek was as full of Highlanders as a wasp−cake is of maggots, and still they were swarming in. Donald and the clansmen, indifferent to the crush and hubbub, clave a way for us to the market−place, where, on the Colonel's advice, they were dismissed to beat for billets. I then took charge and led my companions across to the “Angel,” where the throng was so dense that they might have been giving the ale away.

To get the horses stabled and baited was easy enough, for few of the Highlanders rode south, although it was different going north again. Then, leading my companions into the yard, I pushed into the inn and, by good hap, lighted on the host, nearly out of his five wits with trying to understand one word of English in a score of Gaelic.

“Hello, surry!” said I.

“Gom!” said he, “Staffordsheer at last.”

“I've heard a lot about Leek ale,” said I. “Draw me a mug of it!”

He brought it in a trice, and his face beamed with honest pride as he said, holding it up between my eyes and the light, “What do you think o' that for colour and nap? Damn my bones! None of your London rot−gut, master, but honest Staffordsheer ale. Damme, you can fairly chew the malt in it.”

“I'll bet you a guinea I've drunk better,” said I, with the aleyard at my lips.

“I'd bet on my own ale,” said he, “if the 'Angel' was full of devils let alone petticoats. An', as between friends, y'r 'onour, win or lose, dunna tell my missus you've 'ad better ale than ourn.”

I drank off his ale and said judiciously, “No, I haven't. That's the best ale I've ever drunk,” and handed him his guinea.

“This'n's a bit of fat along with the lean,” said he, spinning the guinea up in the air, and, countrywise, spitting on it for luck. “Be there owt I can do for y'r, sir? A gentleman as knows good ale when he drinks it shudna be neglected for a lot of bare−legged savages that 'anna as much judgment in beer as a sow 'as in draff.” He leaned towards me and added in a whisper, “I'm giving 'em bouse I wudna wesh my mare's fetlocks in, an' they're neckin' it as if it was my rale October.”

“It was thundery in the summer,” said I gravely, whereat he grinned intelligently.

“Y'r 'onour's up to snuff,” said he. “Be there owt I can do for y'r, sir?”

“Fetch the missus,” said I, “and we'll talk.”

The hostess came. Her cheeks were brown as her own ale, and we talked, nineteen to the dozen, for at least ten minutes.

In the end I snapped up the best parlour overlooking the square for Margaret's use, and bedrooms for each of us, paying a substantial bargain−penny, for Mistress Waynflete had handed me back the bag of gold Master Freake had given me. It would be necessary, I found, to oust two or three bare−knees who had marked them for their own, but that could easily be done, if, as was unlikely to be the case, they were sober enough at night to crawl bedwards. These arrangements made, I pushed out and fetched in Margaret, who was very grateful for what I had done, and went off to her room, while we three men took our stand on the bricked causeway and watched the doings in the square.

We saw two or three battalions swing into the square from the Macclesfield road, and the Colonel scanned them keenly, and, as I thought, anxiously. Even to my untrained eye they were a mixed lot; the bulk of them, to be sure, were stout, active, well−armed fighting men, who marched in fair order, six or eight abreast; but there were numbers of oldish men and boys among them, and many were but indifferently armed.

“What do you number all told?” asked the Colonel.

Maclachlan answered in French. There was now no mistaking the gravity in the Colonel's face, and he took snuff so thoughtfully that, for the first time, he forgot me.

“Excuse me, my dear lad,” said he, recovering himself and thrusting out the box towards me. “I hope there's a tobacco−man in the town who sells right Strasburg. I'm running out, and rappee and Brazil are mere rubbish to the cultivated palate.” Then, looking around the square, he added cheerily, “Quite a show for the townsmen!”

Just in front of us, standing on the edge of the gutter, was a little, ancient, distinguished dame, who had been watching the scene with quick, avid eyes. She turned her fierce, scornful face up to the Colonel, and said, “Yes, sir! You are right. It's a show, just a show, for the townsmen. Yet I remember that, thirty years ago, the fathers of these spiritless curs were as eager for the cause as is the eagle for his quarry.”

“So, madam,” said the Colonel very gently.

“So, indeed,” she returned. “But now, in their accursed grubbing for money, they have rooted up every finer instinct, and they think only of their tradings in silks with the Court ladies of London. Better a fine gown sold to godless Caroline than a stout blow struck for God−anointed James.”

She was beyond doubt a lady of quality, but fallen on poverty and now, worst of all to her, on evil, faithless days. As she stopped, short of breath with her sharp speaking, for she was very ancient, a mean lout of a man edged himself up against her to get a better position for watching the arrival of another body of clansmen. In a fierce access of rage she struck him with the ebony stick on which she leaned and, almost hissing the words at him, said, “Back to your buttons and your tassels, Thomas Ashley, and get grace by thinking on your worthy father!”

The man sidled off, and she continued, addressing the Colonel, “In the fifteen his father was one of us, and suffered worthily.”

“For what, madam?” I asked.

“For the cause,” she replied.

“For what particular service to the cause, madam?” I persisted.

“He was zealous against the schismatics, sir,” she said boldly.

“Madam,” was my reply, “if the zeal of any one of us, townsman or clansman, takes the same form this day, I shall certainly wring his neck. We can fight for Charles without burning chapels.”

“Smite−and−spare−not would subscribe to that doctrine,” said Margaret, thrusting her way gently between the Colonel and me, and hooking a hand round an arm of each of us. Putting her lips to my ear, she whispered merrily, “*Push of pike and the Word*,” and then looked so winningly at me that the black shadow lifted, and I smiled back at her.

And now the craning of necks at the angle where the great road curved into the square, betokened something out of the ordinary, which turned out to be the arrival of the Prince's life−guards. They were splendid, well−mounted fellows, clothed in blue, faced with red, and scarlet waistcoats heavy with gold. With them were the leading chiefs of the army, and I heard Maclachlan reeling off their names and qualities in the Colonel's ear. The guard, in number some sixscore, formed three sides of a square and sat their horses, while one of the leaders proclaimed James and took possession of the town.

The cheers of the clansmen died away, only to be renewed more loudly and proudly when another column swept into the square. Here, indeed, were men apt for war and the battle, six abreast and a hundred files deep, with a dozen pipers piping their mightiest, and a great standard flinging to the breeze its proud *Tandem triumphans*. At their head strode a tall young man, very comely and proper, with a frank, resolute, intelligent face. He was dressed in the Highland fashion, with a blue bonnet topped with a white rosette, a broad, blue ribbon over his right shoulder, and a star upon his breast. The thronging thousands of clansmen burst into thundering volleys of Gaelic yells, the waiting leaders bared their heads and bowed, and I knew it was the Prince.

After a short consultation with his intimate counsellors, Charles walked almost directly towards us, making, as it seemed, for the fine house that neighboured the “Angel.”

Even the townsmen, as he approached, raised their hats and cheered a little, for he was on sight a man to be liked. When I hear sad tales of him now, I think of him as I saw him then, and as I knew him in those few stirring days when hope spurred him on, and the star of his destiny had not yet climbed to its zenith. I come of a stock that sets no value on princes, and I would not now lift a hand to snatch the Stuarts out of the grave they have dug for themselves, but it is due to him, and, above all, due to the chiefs and clansmen who followed and fought and died

for him, to say that the Bonnie Charlie I knew was every inch of him a man and a prince to his finger−tips.

Maclachlan darted out and dropped on his knee before Charles, who, with kindly impatience, seized the shoulder−knot of his plaid, haled him to his feet, and plied him with a throng of questions. At some reply made by the young chief, Charles turned his eyes on us, and, easily picking out the Colonel, made for him with eager outstretched hands. For his part, the Colonel stepped clear of the crowd on the causeway and stood at the salute. He was, I thought, the most self−possessed person in the square, and, indeed, was taking a pinch of snuff as soon as the formality was over, while Margaret was red and white by turns, and I shook at the knees as if expecting the Prince, in the manner of old Bloggs, to call me out and thrash me soundly.

The joy of the Prince at being joined by Colonel Waynflete was overflowing.

"My Lord Murray has talked of you," I heard him say, "until I felt that you were the one man in England that mattered, and now here you are. I must tell Sheridan and all of them the good news."

He turned off and called to a group of men near him, and several of them came up and were made known to the Colonel. After more handshaking and chatting, the eager Prince caught the Colonel by the arm and was for dragging him off into the house destined for his lodging, but the Colonel in his turn resisted and led him towards Margaret.

"My daughter, sir," he said, briefly and proudly.

Off came the bonnet, and Charles bowed low and greeted her with very marked courtesy.

"Your prince, madam," he said, "but also your very humble servant. My Court is a small one, and you are as important and welcome an addition to it as is your distinguished father to my army. Swounds, Colonel," turning to him with a merry smile, "I shall put a flea in his lordship's ear when I see him at Derby. He never so much as mentioned your daughter. Man, one might as well talk of stars and forget Venus!"

"There is this excuse for him, sir," said the Colonel, very sedately, "that on the only occasion on which my Lord Murray saw her, which was at Turin in 1738, she was a whirlwind of arms and legs, long plaits and short petticoats."

"Whereas now she—but I will reserve my opinion for the shelter of a fan in a secluded corner at my next little Court." Then, very abruptly, fixing his eyes on me, all of a swither, with my milk−stained cap in my hand, "And whom have we here?"

Whereupon, strangely enough, forgetting all courtliness, Margaret, the Colonel, and Maclachlan fell over one another, so to speak, in telling the Prince who I was. For a few seconds there was a gabble of introductions, which made me feel hot and foolish.

"One at a time," laughed the Prince, "and, of course, Mistress Waynflete first."

"Your Royal Highness," said Margaret, "this is my splendid friend and gallant comrade, Oliver Wheatman."

"Enough, and more than enough, for a poor Prince Adventurer. Give me but the leavings of your friendship and comradeship, Master Wheatman, and I shall be beholden to you. And now, excuse us, madam, I have much to say to your father."

"Sir," said I, "I crave a little boon."

"You begin well," he said, and added, after a little laugh, "With all my heart."

"Here at hand," said I, "is an ancient lady who has faced this rough crowd and this bitter weather to see the Prince of her heart's desire. She is brave as a lion for you, but too modest to do more than stand and pray for you."

And then he did one of those princely things that made rough men willing to be cut down in swathes for him. He strode up to her and seized her trembling hands.

"Nay, kneel not, dear lady," he said, putting an arm around her to restrain her.

"God bless your Royal Highness, and give you victory," she said brokenly. "This is the hour I have prayed for daily these thirty years, and I thank God for giving us a Prince so worthy of an earthly throne. The Lord shall yet have mercy upon Jacob."

"I thank God," said Charles, "for giving me a friend like you."

His green plaid was looped up at his shoulder by a fine brooch, a cairngorm set in a silver rim. This he took off, and pinned it on the trembling woman's breast.

"Wear this from me and for me," he said, speaking with great feeling. Tears were standing in Margaret's eyes, there was a big lump in my throat, and the Colonel was wasting precious Strasburg on the cobbles in the square. When the Prince had pinned it there, he doffed his bonnet, bent gracefully down, kissed her on the lips, and so left

her. The standers−by now cheered in earnest, and the ancient dame fell on her knees in prayer. When she rose she plucked her robe around her, safeguarding her royal gift in her withered hands, and was for timidly stealing away.

"Madam," said I, "I think you are alone."

"Yes, sir," she whispered.

I offered her my arm, saying, "Allow me to escort you to your home?"

The sharp eyes swept over me from my belt upward, and then, without a word, she placed her arm in mine. I looked around to bow to Margaret before starting, but she had disappeared.

We soon reached her house or, rather, cottage, which was in a street behind the west side of the square. She was too tottery, too dazzled, too afflated to speak on the way thither, but, at the door, when with a bow I was intending to leave her, she bade me, in a madam−like way that cut off debate or refusal, to enter with her.

Plain to the casual eye, it was the home of decayed gentility. Here would be refined eating of a dinner of herbs, solaced by talk of prideful yesterdays. You saw it in the few things that still kept their grip on the past: on the wall an old, black painting of a knight in ruff and quilted doubtlet; a pounce−box and a hawking−glove on the chimney−piece, and above it an oval scutcheon, with a golden eagle *naissant* from a *fesse vert*. And hope was ever new−born here, but it was the hope centred in the Virgin−Mother, posed in ivory over a wooden *prie−Dieu*. Nor did I feel that I had shifted from my familiar moorings as I bowed my head when she knelt in prayer.

"Madam," said I, when, with a happy face, she rose and turned and thanked me, "it is in your power to do me a great kindness."

"I shall, then, most surely do it."

"I ask you to pray for the soul of John Dobson."

"He was your friend?" she said gently.

"My friend from boyhood, madam, and this morning I slew him."

There was silence for a space. Then she said, "I will pray daily for the soul of your friend, and for you that God will have mercy upon you and give you peace. We women, who can only pray, do not, I fear, realize how, for our men, the facts of life seem to make havoc of our creeds."

"You are right, madam," I said sombrely. "For me to−day there is no God in heaven."

"Yet the morrow cometh," she replied confidently. "It has come for me. My mind goes back to the time when the evil began that our glorious Prince is now uprooting. In eighty−eight, when I was a maid of some twenty Junes, not uncomely as I remember myself in my mirror, though not comparable with your sweet and splendid mistress, we, then the ancient Hardys of Hardywick, gave our all and lost our all for the cause. Yon scutcheon then hung in a noble hall. I have looked at it with pride and, God be thanked, without regret, during nearly sixty years of loneliness and poverty, but I shall die rich and friended in the possession of this."

She lifted the brooch to her lips and kissed it, and then, poor soul, broke into a fit of coughing that racked her thin frame. A comely serving−woman rushed in to her aid, and together we seated her near the fire and wrapped a shawl around her. She seemed as one who slept with half−shut eyes and dreamed.

"She's of'n tuk like this'n," whispered her woman. "As lively as a lass at a wedding for an hour maybe, and then dreamy and dead−like for hours at a stretch. She's seventy−six come June, but I dunna think she'll live to see it, and to be sure, God bless her, I shall be glad to see her broken heart at rest."

She put a smelling−bottle to her mistress's nose, and bathed the white lips with eau−de−Luce.

"I love her no end," she said simply.

It was time to go. I dropped on my knee and kissed the fair, thin, wrinkled hand. At the touch of my lips she spoke again:

"Good−bye, Harold, my beloved! The God of all good causes go with thee!"

She was back in the long−ago with her lover at her knee, sending him off to fight for the cause, and the ringless finger showed that he had never come back.

I stole out of the room with a mist in my eyes.

When I got on the corner by the Prince's lodging, the first thing that caught my eye was a calash drawn up in the middle of the square, with two very elegant ladies in it, and a sprig of a blackamoor in green breeches and yellow doublet at the horse's head. Margaret and Maclachlan were standing by, and a merry rattle of conversation was going on between them and the new−comers, though Margaret, her quick mind interested in the vivid scenes around, kept turning her head to sweep the square with her eyes.

I had always felt and, for the most part I trust, observed the difference between us, but it struck me now like a blow between the eyes. It was easy to see that Margaret, for all her grey domino, was the mistress of the gay, courtly group; easy, too, to catch the meaning of the eyes the stranger ladies made at one another as they noted with amusement the young Chief's infatuation. Well, he was there, and I was here, by right. I said so to myself very savagely, that there should be no mistake about it, but I must admit to a sour taste in my mouth as I pushed into a passing group of clansmen, and then dodged behind a clump of ammunition wagons, and so got into a side−alley unseen by those searching eyes.

I came to an ale−house where I managed very well, for all that it had its full share of clansmen stuffed into it, making a square meal of bread and cheese and cold bacon, washed down with excellent ale. I made a point of marking myself off as an Englishman by paying for my meal in the English fashion.

Sallying forth, and still avoiding the square, I roamed round the little town, distracting my mind by forcing an interest in what was going on. The Highlanders were happy, noisy, and full of confidence—not unjustly, for so far they had played ninepins with the Royal troops. Everywhere they were hard at it, sharpening dirks and claymores and furbishing muskets, and such of their talk as I could understand was all of battle imminent. In the churchyard I found a number of them practising shooting, with a grand old cross as a target. They had chipped it somewhat already. I cursed them roundly and then bargained it off at the price of a few shillings. They turned their attention, with hopeful grins, to the brass weathercock on the church tower, which I did not deem worth saving. Moreover, it was a better mark, and good shooting was to be encouraged.

I mooned around for an hour or so, very miserable. If my mind was idle a moment, I saw Jack's body lying in the dim−lit passage and the calash in the market−square.

Tired of watching the Highlanders, I suddenly struck out for the “Angel,” intending to see how the horses were doing, a necessary task which I was to blame for neglecting so long. I was going at a great pace along by the shops on one side of the square and, in heedlessly passing a mercer's, had to skip aside to avoid a finely dressed lady coming out of the door, with the shopmaster, his nose nearly at his knees, bowing behind her. She was a stranger to me and, moreover, I had my eye on the spot where the calash had stood, so that, having clean avoided her, I was for striding on, but she said sharply, “What do you mean by such conduct, sir?”

I cannot remember any other occasion in my life when I have been so completely taken aback. The elegant lady who stood there, a quizzing smile on her face and a roguish twinkle in her eyes, was Margaret.

“I've waited and waited your honour's convenience till I could wait no longer,” she said.

There was still the delightful mock anger in her voice, but the smile and twinkle changed their meaning, so to speak. At least I, who delighted to watch the varying shades of expression sweep over her exquisite face, thought so as I stood there, twizzling my cap in my hand, and feeling an utter fool.

“You cannot expect a perfect match in this light,” she went on, plainly enjoying my discomfiture, “especially as I have had to carry the colour in my eye.”

“No, madam,” said I desperately, having to say something, but not having the faintest idea of what she was driving at.

“I disclaim all responsibility if it's a bungle. It will be your fault entirely. Your arm, sir!”

I offered her my arm, into which she slipped hers, jammed on my wretched hat, and together we made for the “Angel.” Of course we must meet Maclachlan, to complete my misery I suppose, and he was keen on joining us, but Margaret disposed of him in a way that reminded me of Kate shooing a turkey off from her feeding chickens. Arrived at the “Angel,” she led the way to her parlour overlooking the square, dragged me hurriedly to the window, and undid the packet. From it she took a patch of cloth and a hank of silk thread. These she first dabbed on my sleeve, and then flourished before my eyes.

“Quite a good match after all! Do they suit me, Oliver?”

She was dressed in a cinnamon−brown joseph, buttoned at the waist, and showing, above and below, an under−dress of supple woven material, creamy in colour and flowered in golden silk. A hat of a military cast, made of some short−napped fur and set off with a great white panache, half hid and half revealed her masses of yellow hair.

“You look perfect,” I said emphatically.

“For my Prince,” she replied softly. “Off with your coat, and let me show you what sort of a housewife I am.”

I did as she bade me, and she doffed hat and joseph. She set me comfortably before the fire in an elbow−chair,

and handed me a new pipe and a fresh paper of tobacco, and insisted on my smoking. Then, sitting almost at my feet in a squat rush−bottomed chair, with quaint bow legs and a back like a yard of ladder, she set to work on the holes Brocton's rapier had made in my coat.

I felt very cubbish as I sat feeding my soul on the picture she made as she bent over her stitchery. A rare hobbledehoy I was in my villainous coat, but what I looked like in my shirt−sleeves, good linen enough but home−made and with never a shred of cuff or ruff to them, was past imagining.

She was quite silent too, and though talk of any sort would have been distasteful to me then, for the picture was enough, I could not help remembering how she had rattled on with Maclachlan. Here was another cursed deficiency. My conversation was as country−like and poverty−stricken as my clothes. I had always ruled the roast at our market ordinaries, where I was looked upon as a bit of a fop and a miracle of learning, and even my farming was solemnly respected because I was so hard and ready a hitter. Here, in a parlour and with her, so beautiful that even her beautiful dress scarce attracted a passing glance, I was dull and ill at ease. The only thing I did, except to look at her, was to let my pipe out and light it again, time after time.

“The man in the shop told me,” Margaret said, “that was the best tobacco that comes from the Americas.”

“I should think it is,” said I; “I've never smoked better.”

“It gives you a lot of trouble,” she answered, and stayed her stitching for a moment to look at me.

“Did you get some right Strasburg for the Colonel?” I asked.

“No. Is he running short?”

“Yes,” said I.

“And no marvel, either. He puts his snuff−box under his pillow, and when I take him his chocolate of a morning, he takes a long, affectionate pinch, and then says, 'Good morrow, sweetheart!'“

I laughed, and then fell silent and wondered. While I had been loafing about the town, she had been attending to my small whims and needs.

And now, after a smart rap at the door, in flounced a sprightly, elegant lady, very gay and very certain of herself.

“What a charming, domestic picture!” she broke out. “I fear I intrude, Margaret dear, but I'm going to stay. The girl is bringing up the tea, and I'm positively dying for a cup and a sit−down. Of course this”—turning gaily round on me, standing there like a great gawk, volubly cursing my shirt−sleeves under my breath—“is the incomparable Oliver! Charmed to meet you, sir!”

I bowed, and Margaret said staidly, “Yes, my lady. This is Master Oliver Wheatman of the Hanyards. Oliver, I have the privilege of introducing you to the Lady Ogilvie.”

I bent in the middle again and gabbled something. It was suitable to the occasion, I hope.

Lady Ogilvie eyed me up and down carefully, much as I should overlook a bullock I had a mind to buy.

“When Davie left me at Macclesfield I told him I'd be guid, and I will be guid, but I wish he hadn't asked me,” she said. “Never mind! At Derby, when we meet again, my promise will be lapsed, and I shall flirt with you, sir, most furiously.”

“Really, my lady,” I replied, “my knowledge of the art of flirtation is merely rudimentary, but I always understood that it required two.”

“Naturally,” she retorted, “that's its great charm.”

“I see my mistake now,” said I, as if thoughtfully. Margaret sat with her needle poised for a stitch, and waited.

“You're learning already, you see! What is it?” said Lady Ogilvie.

“One and a bit would suffice when your ladyship was the one,” I said boldly.

Margaret laughed and resumed the swift play of her needle.

“Indeed so, and I've struck sparks out of turnips in my time,” she replied, with much complaisance. “There's a glisk of intelligence about ye now that was sair to seek when I came into the room. Men are like diamonds, you must know, Margaret darling, all the better for being cut and rubbed. I'll teach ye things, sir, at and after Derby, that is. Till then I'm to be verra guid.”

The bringing in of the tea interrupted us. Over the cups, though Margaret stuck to her work, there was gay talk about the main business of the day —the supper and ball to come.

“The men will simply rave over you, dear,” she said to Margaret. “There's only six of us, seven with you added, you see, for no town ladies wait on His Royal Highness nowadays, and I'm danced off my feet. Maclachlan

will want you every time, and you'll be wise to have him as often as possible, for he dances like a fairy. Davie's none so bad, but Maclachlan is just grand. And the incomparable one," grimacing prettily at me, "will foot it trippingly by the look of him."

"I dance like a three−legged bear," said I, grim enough at having my defects brought home to me.

"Is it that you're telling me?" she replied. "Legs like yours and no music in them! Well, well, I'll take you in hand, that's flat. At Derby, of course."

"Now, Oliver, pray attend to the simpler matters that I deal with," said Margaret, cutting off the last needle of silk. "I've done the best I can for you. Come and appraise my work!"

She held the coat up by the collar, and I stepped forward and examined it.

"Marvellous!" said I. "It's as good as new."

Her ladyship screeched with laughter. "Oh, you courtier!" she said. "I never saw anything better done at the Tuileries. Look a foot higher, you rogue!"

Still even there the job was neatly and thoroughly done, and I thanked Margaret for it heartily. With my coat on, I brightened up, and indeed I had need to, for most of their talk was in and about a world of which I knew nothing. Thanks to Margaret's hints and half−lights, I did well enough.

There came a gentle rap at the door and then, without further ceremony, the Colonel bowed in a visitor. In the twilight at the door there was no seeing who the new−comer was, but as he stepped forward the full light revealed him. It was Prince Charles.

"Stir not, ladies, on your allegiance!" he said gaily. I rose, bowed him into my chair, and stood behind him.

"Oddsfish, as my great uncle used to say, I've come to save your life, Master Wheatman!"

"You need not trouble, sir," said I, "to save what is freely yours to throw away."

"Very well said, sir," he answered, "and I shall not forget it."

"Good lad, Oliver!" said the Colonel, dipping for his snuff−box.

"Still, I must prove my point!" said Charles, smiling merrily. "My Court consists of precisely seven ladies and an unlimited number of gentlemen, the latter, for the most part, fiery chiefs who slash off men's heads as if they were tops of thistles. Yet here are you, sir, keeping two of them all to yourself. And such a two! Lady Ogilvie, whose charms are without blemish—"

"Nay, sir," said I.

"May I pull his ears, Your Highness?" asked her ladyship tartly.

"You may," said Charles, "unless he proves his point. A Prince must be just, you know!"

"That's fair," said Margaret.

"Of course," retorted Lady Ogilvie. "He'll be right if he says I've an eye like an ox and a mouth like a frog."

"Save your ears, Master Wheatman!" said Charles, grinning at me. "What's the blemish?"

"Davie!" said I.

The Prince rocked with laughter, and her ladyship enjoyed it quite as fully.

"It's the smartest hit I've heard since I left Paris," said the Prince.

"Sir," said I, "be good enough to explain. Who is Davie?"

"Her ladyship's husband," he replied.

"Damme!" I ejaculated. "I thought he was only an ordinary Scotchman." Whereat everybody laughed.

"A most delightful interlude in a heavy day's work," said the Prince. "I am unfeignedly vexed, ladies, at having to rob you of so agreeable a cavalier, but I need Master Wheatman myself."

* * * * *

Half an hour later the Colonel stood with me at the town's end to give me my final instructions. I was on Sultan, with urgent letters in my pocket and important work on hand.

We took a pinch of snuff together very solemnly. Then he snapped his box, rubbed Sultan's velvet nose, shook my hand, said good−bye gruffly, and strode back townward. I cantered on into the open road and the night.

CHAPTER XVII. MY NEW HAT

Here was what I had dreamed of. Here was the dearest wish of my heart gratified. I was twenty−three, and I had three−and−twenty's darling equipment—a magnificent horse, a pair of unerring pistols, a fine rapier, a pocket full of guineas, the memory of a woman's grace and beauty, and a tough job in hand. The only material thing I really wanted was a new hat, for yester morning's milk and subsequent bashings and bruisings had ruined my old one. I had not bothered about it as long as it had bobbed alongside the grey woollen hood of Margaret's domino, but, cheek by jowl with her new hat, it had become an offence, and must be remedied.

The black shadow flitted in and out of my mind. I was clean and clear of all blood−guiltiness. I had struck for Margaret as he would have struck for Kate. Fate had been too strong for us, but whatever penance life should lay upon me should be paid to the uttermost farthing. I had this comfort that, could Jack ride up to me now, there would be no change in him. There would be for me the old hearty hand−grip and the boyish, affectionate smile, just as when he had run in to me on the town−hall steps.

I had been commissioned by the Prince to do three things: first, to deliver a dispatch to my Lord George Murray, wherever I should find him, which would probably be at Ashbourne, twelve miles ahead along a good road; second, to carry a letter to Sir James Blount at his house called Ellerton Grange, somewhere near Uttoxeter; third, to make a wide circuit west and south of Derby, picking up all the information I could as to the feeling of the populace and the disposition of the enemy's forces, and to report on this to the Prince in person at Derby at six o'clock the following night. On this third commission the Prince and Colonel Waynflete had laid great stress. An independent and trustworthy report was, it appeared, of the utmost importance.

Finally, as a dependent commission arising out of the first of the duties imposed on me by the Prince, I bore a letter to my Lord Ogilvie from her ladyship. She had summoned me willy−nilly to her room privily.

“Tell Davie yonder that I'm very well and very, very guid,” she said, as she handed me the letter.

“With infinite pleasure, my lady,” I replied.

“It will be true, ye ken,” she asserted, as if there was a corner for dubiety in her own mind regarding the matter.

“Solemnly and obviously true, my lady,” I agreed.

“Oh, thou incomparable Oliver, I wish you were a lass,” she said, lifting her merry, girlish face level with mine, and putting a hand on each of my shoulders.

“Why, my lady?” I said, straightening at her touch.

“Then you could give Davie this as well!” which said, she pecked lightly at me with her sweet lips and kissed me.

It had flustered me greatly, but she only laughed ringingly and delightsomely as I backed out of the room. And when, door−knob in hand, I made my last bow, she had wagged her finger at me for emphasis and said, “Dinna forget to tell Davie I'm very guid.”

Good she was, as beaten gold, and she kept her spirits up to this high pitch to the very end. You can read in Mr. Volunteer Ray's history of the whole affair of the 'Forty−five' how, after Culloden, she was taken prisoner while dressing for the ball which was to crown the expected victory.

I smiled a young man's smile as I thought of it. Experience was writing some items on the credit side of my new account with life. I had met a winsome lady of title and she had kissed me. Margaret, behind my back and to a third party, had called me an “incomparable" something. What, I knew not,—“servant” probably, but I cared not what.

Mile after mile passed without incident of any kind until, at a second's notice, I rode into a ring of muskets which closed round me out of vacancy as if by magic. It was the outermost picket of the army at Ashbourne. I gave the parole, “Henry and Newcastle,” and demanded a guide to my Lord George Murray's quarters. There came a Gaelic grunt out of the gloom; men and muskets disappeared, with the exception of a single clansman, who seized Sultan's bridle and led me into the town.

The General was quartered at the “Swan with Two Necks,” a very respectable hostelry, where my first care was to have a cloth thrown over Sultan, and to order for him a bucket of warm small beer with three or four

handfuls of oatmeal stirred into it. While this was adoing, and I was awaiting a summons to his lordship's presence, I took a nip of brandy in the public room of the inn, and over it amused myself by reading a crude fly−sheet nailed on the wall, offering a reward of fifty guineas to anyone giving information leading to the arrest of one Samuel Nixon, commonly called 'Swift Nicks,' a notorious highwayman, six feet high, of very genteel appearance, well−spoken, but a cruel, bloody ruffian with it all. The Highlander interrupted my reading by beckoning me to follow him. Upstairs we went, and he ushered me into a room where were two gentlemen seated on opposite sides of a table on which were a small map and two large glasses containing a yellowish liquid.

The younger of them was of much the same general appearance as Maclachlan, though by the look of him a simpler and sweeter man. The other, a middle−aged, domineering man with a powerful face, looked angrily at me as I handed him my dispatch.

He read it impatiently, threw it down beside the map, and said, “They're coming on to−night, Davie.” Then, curtly to me, “Your name, sir?”

“Wheatman of the Hanyards.”

“Hanyards? Humph! Are you an Irishman?”

“No, my lord. Not even a Scotchman!”

He glared at me, but his companion laughed, and said, “That's one under your short ribs, Geordie!”

“Damn the Irish!” cried Murray. “They're the ruination of the whole business, Davie, and ye know it.”

“Of course they are,” he replied, “but that's no reason for telling it to an English loon who thinks less of a Scotchman than he does of a pickelt herring.”

“That may be, my lord,” said I to him, “but I think so well of one Scottish lady that I'm proud to be her humble courier.” And I handed him his letter.

“Man! man!” he said ecstatically, as he ripped it open, “ye're welcome as sunshine in December. It's from Ishbel. God bless her pretty face!”

He read the letter eagerly and then thrust it into his bosom.

“I am, further,” I went on, “entrusted with a message from her ladyship.”

“God bless her! Out with it, man, out with it!”

“I was to inform you that she was very, very good,” said I, soberly as a judge passing sentence.

“What do you think of that, Geordie Murray? Very, very guid! Eh, man, isn't she a monkey? God bless her!”

“I'll send the whole lot of 'em packing off back to Edinburgh,” said Murray. “Women are a nuisance on a campaign. Your Ishbel, be hanged to her, wants a carriage all her own and another for her fineries.”

“Ye ken a lot about soldiering, Geordie,” retorted Ogilvie, “no man more, but ye ken less about soldiers than a lad of ten. At Gladsmuir I said to MacIntosh, 'Let's get the damn thing over, Sandy, and be back to breakfast wi' the leddies!' And we did.”

“You did so,” acknowledged Murray. “Now, Davie, take our courier out and feed him. I thank you, sir! You have ridden speedily. Your pace is faster than your tongue.”

“My lord,” said I, “although I am doing his Royal Highness such poor service as lies in me, I am not yet duly acting under his commission and authority.”

“What of it?” he asked.

“Hence I am not an officer under your command, my lord!”

“Excellent logic! And the therefore, my beef−eating friend, is....?”

“That I would as lief knock your head off as look at you!”

“When you are an officer,” cried he, “by gad, sir, I'll teach ye the manners of an officer. Till then, my birkie,” rising and holding out his hand, “guid luck to ye!”

We shook hands heartily and so parted.

“He's a grand man is Geordie Murray,” said Ogilvie, as he led me to another room across the landing. “Just a wee bit birsy, maybe, but these damned Irish have got his kail through the reek. They're o'ermuch on his spirits of late.”

All his other talk was of his lady, though he looked well enough after me, and I made a good meal of the better half of a cold chicken, a cottage loaf, and a tankard of poor ale. Ashbourne is noted, say the wise in such matters, for the best malt and the poorest ale in England.

I am overmuch English, as is often the case with us who live in the very heart of England. The famous Mr.

Johnson is a shire−fellow of mine, and very proud I am of it, and reckon it among the greatest events of my life that he has bullyragged me soundly for differing from him, and being right, about a line of Virgil he had misquoted in my hearing. Like Mr. Johnson, I love men and loathe dancing−masters, and these Scotsmen were men indeed, my Lord Ogilvie, as I came to know later, one of the choicest. He was a spare−built man, in years thirty or thereabouts, with a face all lines and angles, and dotted with pock−marks. For a lord, his purse was very bare of guineas, and nature had made up for it by giving him a belly full of pride. For him, the Highland line had been the boundary of the known world, so that his mind was a chequer−work of curious ignorance and knowledge.

From the first I liked him for his joy in his dainty lady. She was the daughter of a cadet of a distant branch of the famous Bobbing John's family, and had spent nearly all her life in France till, on a chance visit to Scotland, she had been snapped up by Ogilvie. They were a strangely matched pair, she from the gay *salons* of Paris, he from the misty mountains of the north; but mutual love had assorted them to admiration, for the heart of each was sound as a bell.

Between bites I answered questions as to how she had looked, what she'd said, done, and so forth.

“Was she wearing her brown riding−coat with the pretty wee shoulder capes?” he asked.

“No,” said I, becoming more interested.

“Or her creamy dress with the gold flowers all over it?”

“No,” said I again, smiling at my discoveries.

“She's keeping 'em for London,” he explained. “Gosh, man! She will look divine in 'em.”

“She won't,” said I, clipping away at the sweet bits still hanging on the carcass of my chicken.

“It'll take your logic all its time to keep six inches o' cauld steel out of your brisket,” he said very fiercely.

“Never had better chicken in my life,” said I, watching him out of one eye—quite enough for any Scotsman.

“Damn the chicken!” he roared. “Why won't she?”

“Because she's given 'em away,” I explained in my airiest tones.

“The blue blazes of hell!” gasped his lordship. “Given 'em away, and they cost me twenty pounds English! Given 'em away!” he whined, utterly lost for words, “given 'em away! The callack's clean dawpit. Twenty pounds good English money!”

“Nothing like enough!” said I. “You'll be sorry it wasn't two hundred.”

Two hundred pounds English was, however, something too stupendous for his mind to grasp, and the gibe had no effect on him. While I finished my ale he chuntered away in his own Gaelic.

“I'll mak' it up in London,” he said at length, “but it'll be the deil's own job.”

“It will indeed,” I agreed, and drained my tankard dry.

A look at my watch told me it was time to set about my second commission. Sultan was brought from the stable, fit as a fiddle and eager to be going. I examined my pistols, ran the tuck up and down in its scabbard, leaped on Sultan, and asked for the Uttoxeter road.

My Lord Ogilvie parted from me on the fairest terms, bringing me with his own hands a great stirrup−cup, or “dock−an−torus,” as he called it.

“Man,” said he, “I'm right glad to be acquent wi' ye. I was thinking I'd gang all the way to London without coming across a man worth fighting, much less friending, but I was in the wrang of it. Here's to ye!”

“My lord,” said I, “you match your sweet lady. Both of you have been wondrous kind to a hard−hit man.”

We gripped hands, saluted, and parted.

It was all but pitch−dark, and the moon was not due to rise for more than an hour, but the sky was clear and the stars were out in masses for company and guidance. Ellerton Grange was near Uttoxeter, and Uttoxeter was a sizeable townlet just inside my own county, and some fifteen miles from Ashbourne. The road was the usual cross−road, all of it bad and most of it vile. I left the going to Sultan, who did the best he could, like the gallant and experienced creature he was. There was nothing for me to do except to keep a good look out and the north star just behind my right hand.

My mind was busy going over all the memories of the last three days. I tried hard, but in vain, to skip the black part, the thought of which made me flinch as if the branding−iron was white−hot against my cheek. Mentally I saw double—Jack's red blood with one eye and Margaret's amber hair with the other. As I rode I fought memory with memory, mingling gall and honey, now mumbling broken prayers and now singing snatches

of country love−songs, and so got on as best I could. In the journey of life a man pays for what he calls for. Life had given me what I wanted, and the price thereof had been death.

Not only was the night dark but the countryside was empty. I rode past dim outlines of houses and through vague, dreamlike villages without seeing a soul or hearing a sound. Once I saw a light ahead by the roadside, but out it went as the rattle of Sultan's hoofs told of my coming. It was no wonder, for these poor folk were living between two armies and wanted neither, friend nor foe. For them it was only a choice between the upper and the nether millstone. At last I came to a wayside ale−house where lights were showing. I rode up, dismounted, ran the reins over the catch of the shutter, and went in.

In the low, untidy room I found a man and a woman, bent over a miserable fire, with their backs to a table whereon were set out mug and platter and other things useful for a meal. They rose to greet me, and their faces told me that they were expecting some one and supposed that I was he. When they saw their mistake, the woman stepped smartly in front of the man and said, “Lord, sir, how you frighted us! What can I get for your worship?”

“A mug of good mulled ale,” said I. “Give me good mulled ale and a little information, and you shall have a crown for your pains.”

I spoke pleasantly, having no need, as a mere passer−by, to do otherwise, but if I had been obliged to have dealings with them, I should have begun by distrusting them outright. The man was of the common sort of ale−house keeper, ugly, beery, and stupid, and old enough to be the father of his wife, as I call her on account of the wedding ring on her finger. She was, for the place and post, a complete surprise, being a jaunty, townish, garish woman, dressed in decayed finery. He would have slit my throat for a groat, she for a grudge. They looked that sort.

The woman went into another room, beyond the little bar where the drinkables were stored, to get the spices for the mulling, and the man shuffled grumpily after her. Hanging on the wall behind the bar was a fly−sheet, the very same I had read in the “Swan with Two Necks” at Ashbourne.

“Swift Nicks” was a much−wanted gentleman, and evidently a tobie−man with a wide range of activities. Out of mere vacancy of mind I walked near to read the fly−sheet again, and, by a curious chance, among the drone of words from the other room, the only one my quick ear could pick out distinctly was “Nicks.”

This made me wary, and when the woman came out and busied herself at the fire, and called me to see what a prime mull she was brewing, I stood over her, to all intent watching the process but ready for anything. And not without need, for her dirty husband crept softly out after her, thinking to catch me unawares. I flashed at him like a jack at a minnow, wrenched a wretched old blunderbuss out of his hands, and with the butt of it knocked him sprawling back into the other room.

The prime muller merely cackled with false laughter and went on with her mulling. I fetched him in by the scruff of the neck, stood him up against the bar, and said, “I think you're in for the soundest thrashing you've ever had in your life.”

“Sarves yer right, sawney,” said the woman. “Plase let him off, sir. He thought yow was Swift Nicks.”

“Yow bitch!” he growled. “Yow set me on!”

“Yow'm a ligger!” she retorted. “I towd yow the gen'leman was nowt like Swift Nicks.”

“How do you know that?” I asked.

“By the print,” was the quick reply. “It tells yow all about him.”

I fetched the fly−sheet down, held it out to her, and said sharply, “Read it to me!”

I thought this would clean beat her, but she said, simply enough, “I canna rade it mysen, but I've heard it read lots o' times.”

“Have you heard it read?” I asked the man.

“Lots o' times,” he echoed surlily, and I saw the woman's fingers twitch as if she longed to furrow his ugly face with her nails.

“Then why didn't you know?”

I spoke to him but turned sharp on the woman, and saw hell in her face. She was almost too quick for me, and answered fawningly, “The thought o' the money made a fool on 'im, sir. Plase let him off. I've mulled th' ale prime for her honour.”

This was true and I enjoyed it greatly. I sent the man out to rub Sultan down while she prepared for him under my eyes a warm drench of ale and meal.

“Be y'r honour going far?” she asked.

“That depends how far it is to Ellerton Grange. Do you know it?”

“Oh aye, y'r honour. Sir James Blount lives there. It's three miles out'n Tutcheter on the Burton road.”

“Is it a straight road to Uttoxeter?”

“Half a mile on yow'll come to a fork. Tek the road on the right and just ride after y'r nose. Fetch the drench, Bob!”

She carried it off well, but I felt there was a deep strain of roguery in her. Still, willing to part on a lighter note, I gave her the crown, saying, “You deserve a better trade.”

“It's none so bad,” she said.

“And a better husband.”

“Oddones! D'ye think....”

She stopped abruptly, plainly caught out for the first time.

A minute later I was off again. At the fork Sultan made for the left, and I had to pull him sharply to the right. The road got steadily worse, but Orion was clear in view ahead of me, dropping down behind Uttoxeter, and I pushed on. If a man is to turn back because of a bad road, he'll not travel far in the Shires. Soon, however, there was no road at all, and I was plump in open country. Sultan stopped and sniffed, and then turned his head round as if to tell me, what I already felt was the truth, that I had been an ass for not leaving it to him.

“So ho! Sultan!” said I, patting his warm neck. “I deserve all you say, my beauty! I've put you in for a nice job.”

The right road must lie somewhere to my left. I turned him that way and he walked on suspicious and sniffing. Fortunately the moon had risen, and the Jezebel's lie would only cost me a trifling delay. She would have lied with a purpose, and I puzzled myself in trying to reason it out. In a few minutes we came to the side of a spinney with a low wall of rough stones cutting it off from the field. I was intently looking ahead, when on a sudden Sultan swerved so powerfully that I rocked in the saddle. I wouldn't have touched him with the spur, short of utter necessity, for a fistful of guineas, and I soothed him, and then turned to look for what had upset him.

To be candid I swerved myself. Most of us in these days are pleased to laugh at superstitions, provided we are in good company round a roaring fire. I was here alone in a lonely field, at nine of the clock on a winter night, and there, flittering and gliding through the spinney was a something in white. Virgil believed in ghosts, and so did Joe Braggs, and I, by oft reading the one and listening to the other, had preserved an open mind. Apparently Sultan had his doubts, for he shivered and whinnied.

I pulled his head round away from the ghost, drew out a pistol, and watched the unchancy thing's movements. It was evidently meant for me, for it made a slight turn and came straight towards me. Then my man's logic, as Margaret twittingly called it, came to my aid. Gloomy as it was, I saw the outlines of some steps by which the low wall could be crossed, and ghosts, both my authorities being in agreement on this, were independent of such purely human contrivances. So, waiting till the ghost was climbing down on my side, I said sternly, “Stop, or I fire!” Whereon it heaved a great sob and tumbled full length to the ground.

I jumped down, slipped the reins over Sultan's head, and pulled him up to the spot. The ghost was a well−grown girl, dressed in nothing but a white night−gown, for I could see her bare feet beyond the hem of it.

“Don't be afraid, dear,” said I soothingly, for she was dumb and half dead with fright. “What can I do for you? Say it, and it's done. Come now, be brave!”

She sat up, leaning on her right hand, and turned her pallid, quivering face up to mine.

“Robbers, sir!” she gasped. “They're murdering father and mother. For God's sake, sir, go and stop them.”

“Of course,” I replied cheerfully, slipping off my jacket. “Come on, my brave lass!”

I helped the lass to her feet, put her into my jacket, jumped into the saddle, and lifted her astride behind me.

“Clip me tight! Which way?”

“Round the spinney first, sir!”

Off we went, and this time I touched Sultan with the spur and he flew along. Round the spinney; slantways across a field; up and over a gate, the girl clinging to me like a leech; down a lane; up and over another gate; and then the girl's shaking right arm was thrust over my shoulder.

“There's th' ouse! 0', God, if we anna in time!”

“How many are there?”

“Two, sir.”

I pulled Sultan up at the farmyard gate, helped her down, and jumped after her. Hitching the horse, we started across the yard.

Luckily the low−down moon was on the far side of the house, and we could run softly up in the pitch dark. As I write I feel that brave girl's hard grip of my hand as we raced on. At a half−open door we halted; she loosed hold of me, and I tiptoed on alone. From within I heard the crash of one pot and then another on the brick floor of the kitchen, as the villain, searching for hidden money, smashed them to the ground. Bitten to the vitals by his want of success, he yelled, “I'll burn the sow's eye out! That'll open her mouth.”

With wrath flaming in my heart I stepped into the doorway leading to the kitchen. My eyes lit on a poor woman bound hard and fast in a chair, and a masked beast, his big white teeth showing through lips thrust wide apart in a grin of hellish rage, approaching a red−hot poker towards her face. I shot him, and he tumbled into a squirming heap. The other villain raced for dear life through the open front door. My second bullet got him on the very threshold, for he yelped and sprang into the air like a stricken buck, but he held on. I e'en let him go, not daring to leave the unkilled scoundrel on the floor, for he had a regular battery of pistols in his belt. The girl was already untying her mother, and her father, bound and gagged in his chair in the ingle−nook, could bide a while. So I plucked the pistols out, there were six of them, and rattled them down on the table. The man was bleeding like a stuck pig, and his purpling face and heaving throat showed that he was choking. As I destined him for the gallows, I picked him up, flung him face down on the table, and thumped him violently in the back, whereupon he coughed up a tooth. My bullet had stripped out all his grinning front teeth clean and clear, just as our Kate's dainty thumb strips the row of peas out of a peascod. Once the tooth was up he was not greatly hurt, and, holding one of his own pistols to his head, I bade him unstrap the farmer. As soon as the latter was free, I ordered him to strap the robber to a kitchen chair, which he did very thoroughly. The instant this job was done, he leaped to fondle and hearten his wife. She kissed him back and, without a word, feebly pointed to me, whereupon he turned and thanked me.

“Thank your brave daughter,” said I, and then he jumped at her and hugged her in his big arms, blubbing out, “My bonny, bonny Nance!”

At my wish he lit a lantern, and we went out and stabled Sultan. We went back through the kitchen to make a search of the front of the house. A pretty sight awaited me within doors. The good wife was sipping at a cup of parsnip wine, and the girl was again wearing nothing but her nightdress. With crimson face and downcast eyes, she stood there holding my coat out.

“Hallo, ghostie!” said I, smiling at her. “You want to frighten me again, do you?”

Too confused to say a word, she lackeyed me into my coat and then ran upstairs. To cut short her mother's tearful thanks, I led the way to the door, and we started our examination.

Some two yards from the door−sill the feeble rays of the lantern were reflected from something on the ground. To my great satisfaction it was fair booty to me, nothing less than my closest need, a rare good hat made of the finest beaver. The band was buckled with gold, and there was a taking and surely very fashionable cock to the brim. I sent my old one spinning into the blackness and clapped my new treasure on my head. Now I could walk side by side with Margaret and not be ashamed, at any rate not of my hat.

“The rogue jerked it off when I winged him,” said I.

“Gom! He did jump, that's sartin,” said the farmer, whose name, I ought to say, I had learned was Job Lousely.

It was quite a step down to the road, and we made no further discovery till we got to the gate. Here it was his turn to be lucky, for there was an excellent nag hitched to a rail. It was on Job's ground and he gave it a home in his stable.

“It'll mak up for the crockery,” he said, with great delight.

Back in the kitchen we found Nance fully dressed and busy laying a meal on the table. She was so taken aback when I declared I was not hungry and couldn't stay if I had been, that, to save her distress, I had a bite and a sup of ale, while Job fetched Sultan round to the door. She was a sweet, comely maiden, and it did my heart good to see her put a horn of ale to the bleeding lips of the robber. He drank ravenously, like a dog after a hard run. He was where he deserved to be, with his feet in the short, straight path to the gallows, and I pitied him not. Nance did, and it's good for the world that women are made that way.

“How far is it to Ellerton Grange?” I asked Job, who came in to tell me Sultan was ready.

“A matter of six miles, sir. Three from here to Tutcheter, and three more on to the Grange.”

“How funny, father,” interposed Nance. “This is the second time tonight a gentleman has asked the road to Ellerton Grange.”

It would hardly have struck Job as funny if it had been the twenty−second, but Nance was quick and shrewd.

“Ho! Ho!” said I. “Tell me about it, little woman!”

“I was wishing my Jim good night at the gate, just before father came home, when a man riding by pulled up and asked the road to Ellerton Grange.”

“Did you make him out, Nance?” I asked.

“Not much of him, sir, but the moon shone on his face when he took his hat off to wipe his forehead, and it looked for all the world like an addled duck−egg.”

“Well put, Nance,” said I, laughing. “First time I saw that face I thought it was like a bladder of lard.”

“You know him, sir?”

“I think I do, Nance, and I must be after him.”

Out of the robber's string of pistols I selected a pair for myself. They were lawful prize, and equal in quality to those Master Freake had given me, so that the rascal had probably stolen them. I saw that all the others were loaded, and advised Job to watch him all night and to lift him, chair and all, into a cart the next morning and drive him off to the nearest Justice.

Job and his wife renewed their thanks when I was in the saddle. Nance insisted on coming to open the gate, and on the way there she gave me full and careful directions as to the way to Tutcheter and thence to the Grange.

She swung the gate open and let me through. Then she came to my sword side and held up her face to be kissed.

“Good−bye, ghostie!”

“Good−bye, sir! God bless you!”

Kissing and blessing were reward enough for my service, and I rode on lighter at heart for them.

CHAPTER XVIII. THE DOUBLE SIX

The time had not been wasted. I had had a stirring experience and got a hint of dangers and uncertainties ahead. Moreover, and on this I plumed myself most, I had acquired a handsome hat. It was a trifle roomy, but a wisp of paper tucked within the inside rim would remedy that defect. The moon was getting higher and brighter, and I pulled my new treasure off again and again to admire it. It had belonged to a rascal with an excellent taste in hats. I was very content with it, and looked forward eagerly to catching the glint in Margaret's eyes when she saw it. After all it behoved me to look well in her presence, and I regretted that the rogue had not shed his coat and breeches as well. No doubt they were equally modish and becoming, and would have set me up finely, though all the tailors in London town couldn't make me a match for Maclachlan. A man has to be born to fine clothes, like a bird to fine feathers, before he looks well in them. The thought made me rueful. I jammed my hat on fiercely, and slapped Sultan into a longer stride.

The man ahead of me was, out of question, the Government spy, Weir. It was now a full day and more since I had crammed my Virgil into his maw, and he had had time to get into these parts. Thirty years before there had been much feeling for the honest party hereabouts, and among the gentry along the border of the shires there would be some in whose hearts the old flame still flickered. Indeed, my own errand proved so much, and a noser−out like Weir would be well employed in rooting up fragments of gossip over the bottle and memories of beery confidences at market ordinaries—sunken straws which showed the back−washes of opinion beneath the placid surface flow of our rural life. I dug my fingers into my thigh and imagined I was wringing the rascal's greasy neck, and the feeling did me good.

I began to ride past scattered houses and then between rows of cottages. Sultan was tiring a little, but, being an experienced horse, pricked up at the sight and cantered down the dead main street of the town. The shadows of the houses on my left ended in an irregular line on the cobbled causeway on my right. Near the town end I came on an exception to the black−and−white stillness of the houses—an inn on my right ablaze with light and full of noise. A merry liquorish company it held, some quarrelling, some rowdily disputatious, and a few stentors trying to drown the rest by roaring a tipsy catch. I pulled Sultan towards the verge of the shadows to see if I could make anything out, and he, supposing, no doubt, that I was guiding him towards bait and stable, made a half−turn towards the portico that ran on pillars along the face of the inn. I checked him at once, but, in that trice of time, a man leaped from behind a pillar, laid one hand on the pommel of my saddle, and raised the other in warning. He was a little man, and in his eagerness he stood on tiptoe and whispered, “Ride on, Master Wheatman! One second may cost you dear!”

Even as he spoke, some movement within startled him, and he leaped back into the shadow before I could question him.

I urged Sultan onward, and once out of footfall of the inn, pricked him into a gallop. Out of the town he fled, past the end of the Stafford road, along which two hours of Sultan's best would bring me to the Hanyards and mother and Kate, and I kept him at it for a full two miles before I gave him a breather and settled down to think out what it meant.

I did not know the man from Adam, but he had me and my name quite pat. He was obviously a friend, for his bearing and his warning alike bespoke his goodwill towards me. He must be waiting there for some purpose, and he must have seen me somewhere and learned enough about me to know from what source danger to me was certain to come. In this case it was plain that the danger was within the inn. The carousers might be, nay, almost certainly were, soldiers, though there had been none in the town when Job Lousely had left it less than two hours ago. The news of my escapade might well have leaked into Stafford by now; I was very well known in the town, and the stranger might be some Stafford chap benighted at Uttoxeter after his business at the market. As I say, I did not know the man, but he might very well know me; he was, perhaps, some old schoolfellow, grown out of recollection by moonlight, and still willing to serve an old butty. This seemed the likeliest solution of the difficulty, and it made me very sad. The news about Jack would be whispered round by now, and I could never walk the old streets again without seeing nods and shudders everywhere. *See him? That's him! Killed his best friend! Wheatman of the Hanyards! Never held his head up since! And hadn't ought to!* The chatter of the

townsfolk crept into my ears between the hoof−beats, and made me sick and dizzy.

It would not have happened but for the bladder−faced scoundrel ahead of me, now creeping around like a loathsome insect to sting a man of ancient name and fame, and I was eager to be at him again. Sultan, without more urging, had made the furlongs fly in gallant style, and it was time to be looking out for my landmarks. Nance had made me letter−perfect in them. Here, on the right, was the woodward's cottage where the road began to run downhill into a bottom dark with ancient elms: there, on my left, in an open space among the boles, the moon showed up a worn, grey column which marked the spot where, in the wild days of the Roses, a Parker Putwell had slain a Blount in unfair fight for a light of love not worth the blood of a rabbit. Nance had very earnestly told me the old, sad tale, to impress the spot on my mind, for the long lane up to Ellerton Grange began in the shadows just beyond the monument, and wound away up the slope to the right. The road carried us up where the moon−light fell on meadows that were almost lawns, and across them to a maze of buildings. A minute later, I leaped off Sultan and hammered away at the studded oaken door of Ellerton Grange.

No man came to my summons, and I sent a second volley of rat−tats echoing through the house before I heard a shuffling of feet within and a drawing of big bolts. The door crept open for a foot or so, and an old man's head, with a lantern trembling over it, appeared in the gap.

“Who's there?” he quavered.

“Wheatman of the Hanyards,” I answered; “but my name is nothing to the purpose and my business is. I must see Sir James Blount.”

“He's abed,” said he, “hours ago!”

“Then fetch him out!”

The old man pushed his lantern close to my face and straightened himself to take a fair look at me. He had sunken cheeks and toothless gums, and hairless eyes with raw, red lids, and out of all question was some ancient, rusty serving−man, tottery and slow, but quick−minded enough, and of a dog−like faithfulness to the hand that fed him.

“Young and masterly,” he muttered, “and o'er young to be so o'er masterly. But I mind the day when I would 'a' raddled his bones with my quarterstaff.”

“I won't naysay it, grandad,” I answered, seeking to humour him. “In your time you've been a two−inch taller lad than I am. Not so big o' the chest, though, grandad.”

“Who're you grandadding? I was big enough o' the chest when I could neck meat and drink enough to fill me out. Now!”

As he spoke he gripped a handful of the waistcoat that hung loosely about him, and added, “Once it was a fair fit, my master. It's cold and late for my old bones to be creaking about, but Trusty's the dog for the tail−end of the hunt, and a Blount's a Blount and mun be served.”

“Fetch him out!” I repeated. “I've ridden hard and far to serve him.”

The ancient took another look at me and said to himself in a loud whisper, after the manner of old and favoured serving−men, “A farmering body all but his hat, and none o' your ride−by−nights.”

“Fetch him out!” said I again, not for want of fresh words to say to the candid old dodderer but to keep him to the point.

“Oh−aye,” said he, and shuffled off.

He left me fuming, for his last mutteration, as he shook his lantern to stir the flame up a bit, was, “Knows a true man when he sees one. More used to a carving−knife than a sword, I'll be bound. What did he say? Wheatman o' sommat! Reg'lar farmering name!”

I kicked the door wide open and watched the lantern bobbing along the hall. The light made pale shimmerings on complete suits of mail hanging so life−like on the high, bare, stone walls, that it seemed for all the world as if the knights had been crucified there and, little by little, age after age, had dropped to dust, leaving their warrior panoplies behind —empty shells on the shore of time from which the life had dripped and rotted. The old man toiled up the grand staircase at the far end of the hall and turned to the right along a gallery. The friendly light disappeared, leaving me darkling and alone. Sultan sniffed his way to the door, pushed in his head and neck, and rubbed his nose against my breast in all friendliness. I flung my arms round his neck and caressed him, and in those anxious minutes in the doorway of Ellerton Grange he was comrade and sweetheart to me, and comforted my spirit greatly.

Footsteps and a voice within made me turn my head. A man came at a run down the stairs and along the hall. After him the old serving−man hastened, lantern in hand, as best he could.

“Sir James Blount?” said I.

“The same,” said he curtly and confusedly.

“I bring you a letter from a very exalted person, Sir James,” I explained.

He took it from me much as he would have taken a bowl of poison. “The light! The light! You slow old fool! The light!” he said, jerking the words out as if his soul was in distress, and the ancient, barely half−way down the hall, quickened his poor pace up to his master. He, tearing the lantern out of the feeble hands, and rattling it down on a table, ripped open the letter and devoured its contents.

The light of the lantern revealed the face of a man still young, but at least a half−score years my elder. He had a thin−lipped, sensitive mouth, a great arched nose, and quick, eager eyes. His mind was running like a mill−race, and his fine face twitched and wreathed and wrinkled under the stress of the flow. Another thing plain enough was that the old man had lied when he said his master was abed, for he was fully and carefully dressed and his wig had not in it a single displaced or unravelled curl. This was no half−awakened dreamer, but a man with the issues of his life at stake.

He crushed the letter in his hand and paced up and down the hall, muttering to himself. I turned and rubbed Sultan's nose to keep him quiet and happy. The old servant took charge of the lantern again, and followed his master up and down with his eyes.

“A year ago, yes! A year ago, yes!” I heard Sir James say. He quickened his steps and the words came in jerks, mere nouns with verbs too big with meaning for him to utter them. “A word! A dream! A dead faith! Yes, father! The devil! Sweetheart!”

There is a great line in the Aeneid which I had tried in vain a hundred times to translate. Three days agone I would have tilted at it once more with all the untutored zeal of a verbalist. I should never need to try again. There are some lines in the Master that life alone can translate. *Sunt lachrymae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt.*

After a turn or two in silence, Sir James broke off his pacing and came to me.

“Sir,” he said, “you will know enough to excuse my inattention to a guest. I must make it up if I can. Give me the lantern and wait for us here, Inskip. Come with me, sir, and stable your horse. Gad so, sir,” holding up the lantern, “you ride the noblest animal I have ever seen. Woa, ho, my beauty! All my men are abed, so we must do it ourselves, but, by Heaven, it will be a pleasure, Master—what may I call you, sir?”

“Just the plain name of my fathers—Oliver Wheatman of the Hanyards.”

“A good strong name, sir, though my fathers liked it not.”

“And you, Sir James?”

“Frankly, it is a name which to me has ceased to be a symbol. A good fellow can call himself 'Oliver' without setting my teeth on edge. I had a grand foxhound once, and called him 'Noll,' just because he was grand. My dear old father consulted a London doctor as to the state of my mind. It made him anxious, you see! The great man said, gruffly enough, that I was as sane as a jackdaw. Thereupon my dear dad, one of the best men that ever lived, had the dog shot!”

He laughed, reminiscently rather than merrily, and was to my mind bent on getting a grip on himself again. We made Sultan comfortable for the night, and then Sir James courteously said it was high time to be attending to me. He made no further indirect reference to the situation, until, as he was leading me along the hall, he stopped opposite a great dim picture, hanging between two sets of mail, and held the lantern high over his head to give me a view of it. With a strange mixture of resentment and pathos, he said, “A man's ancestors are sometimes a damned nuisance, sir!”

“They are indeed!” I replied. “There's one of mine shaking his fist at me over the battlements of the New Jerusalem.”

He laughed heartily, and, with Inskip trailing patiently behind us, led me upstairs, and through the gallery into a long corridor, lit by lanterns fixed in sconces on the walls. We stopped opposite a door, and he was about to lead me in when another door farther along the corridor opened and a lady came out. She was all in white with dark hair hanging loose about her shoulders, and there was a something in her arms.

Down went the lantern with a bang, and Sir James flew like a hunted buck along the corridor. He whipped his arms around the lady and kissed her passionately, and then flung on his knees and held out his arms. She put the

something in white into them and there was a little puling cry.

"Married a year come Christmas," whispered old Inskip, "and the babby's five weeks old to−morrow."

A serving−woman bustled out of another room, and the lady and child were affectionately driven off to bed under her escort. Sir James came slowly back.

"My wife and son, Mr. Wheatman," he said. "You must meet them to−morrow. The young rascal cries out whenever I desecrate him with my touch. It would have served him right to have christened him 'Oliver.'"

I laughed heartily, for he was fighting himself again by gibing at me. He sent off the old man to scour the pantry for a supper for me, and then pushed open the door and led me into the room.

For size and dignity, it was a room to take away the breath of a poor yeoman. It seemed to me a Sabbath day's journey to the great blazing hearth, where two men were sitting; the high white ceiling was moulded into a wondrous design, with great carved pendants hanging from it like icicles from the eaves of the Hanyards. Many bookcases ran half−way up the walls round the greater part of the room, filled with stores of books such as my heart had never dreamed of, great leather−bound folios by platoons, and quartos by regiments. If I could get permission I would steal an hour or two from sleep to eye them over, and as we walked towards the hearth I got behind my host in my slowness and had to step up smartly to get level with him to make my bow of introduction. I gasped with the shock as I stepped into the arms of Master John Freake.

"My dear lad," he cried, "what luck! What luck! How are you? How are they?"

He made me sit down beside him, for here as elsewhere he was easily the most important man present, though his bearing was ever quiet and modest. He spoke of me to Sir James in warm and kindly phrases, and it soon became manifest that his good word was a passport into my host's confidence and regard. The three gentlemen filled their glasses and toasted me with grave courtesy, and I easily slid out of the uneasy mood into which Inskip's candour and my unaccustomed surroundings had driven me.

The third man present was a Welsh baronet, Sir Griffith Williams, a far−away cousin and close friend of Sir Watkin Wynne, whose name I remembered to have heard on the Colonel's lips at Leek. Sir Griffith was a brisk, apple−cheeked man of forty or thereabouts, very fluent of speech in somewhat uncertain English, with fewer ideas in his head than there are pips in a codlin, but what there were of them singularly clear and precise. He reminded me of Joe Braggs, who could only whistle three tunes, but whistled them like a lark.

Inskip brought me a rare dish of venison−pie and various other good things, and laid out the table for me. I left Master Freake's side to eat my supper and listen to their talk.

They made various false starts, followed by dead silences. It was clean useless for Sir James to talk about his baby. Sir Griffith had had a long family and so had exhausted the topic years ago, whilst Master Freake, a bachelor, knew nothing about it. There had been a great flood in the Welshman's valley in the autumn and he harangued upon it in style, and not without gleams of native poetry, but Sir James had never seen a flood and Master Freake had never been to Wales, so the flood soon dried up.

There was a silence for some minutes, busy minutes for me with an apple tart that was sublime with some cream to it, and I was settling down to the sweet content of the well−fed when Sir James broke out.

"Mr. Wheatman has brought me an invitation, hardly to be distinguished from a command, to meet His Royal Highness at the Poles' place tomorrow."

The eager Welshman bounced on to his feet, raised his glass and said, "To the Prince, God bless him." Sir James had to follow his example, though he was in no mood for it, and it would have looked ill had I not joined in, and moreover the wine was excellent.

"You will excuse me, gentlemen," said Master Freake. "I am not clear which Royal Highness is referred to, and besides I have no politics."

"God bless him," bubbled the Welshman. "I shall join him when he has crossed the Trent."

Again there was silence for a space.

"So the question is put, and I must give my answer," said Sir James, breaking the stillness. "I must put my hand to the plough or draw back. I must keep my word or break it. Can I be loyal to my father's creed and also to my child's interests? I've got to be both if I can. If I can't be both, which is to have the go−by? Fate has put me in a cleft stick, Master Wheatman. On his death−bed my father handed on to me his place in the old faith. He was a devoted adherent of the exiled House, the close friend and associate of Honest Shippen, and even more intimately concerned than he in the underground network of intrigue and preparation which was constantly being woven,

ruined, and re−woven up to his death ten years ago. He left me poor and encumbered with debt, for he had been prodigal in his sacrifices for the cause. It is a wonder that he died in his bed rather than on the block, but he was as wary as he was zealous. For nine years I lived here the life of a hermit, alone with my debts and my books. Then I met a young girl”—his voice broke badly—“who became to me the all−in−all of my life. By good fortune I also met Master Freake, who took my affairs in hand for me and has helped me wisely and generously.”

“For ten per cent, Oliver,” interrupted Master Freake.

“Nonsense! Wisely and generously, I repeat,” said Sir James warmly.

“For ten per cent on good security, I repeat,” answered Master Freake gravely.

“Damn your ten per cent!”

“Looks like it, and the security into the bargain!” said Master Freake very quickly.

“Swounds! that's just it!” said Sir James. He rose and paced backwards and forwards between me and the hearth. “A year ago, sir,”—he addressed me in particular—“I should have shouted with joy at the summons to take the place among the adherents of the cause which my father would have held had he lived, and which it was his heart's wish on his death−bed that I should take for him. The cause and the creed are nothing to me as such, for I place no value on either. Your talk about the right divine of old Mr. Melancholy, mumming and mimicking away there at Rome, makes me smile. He's an old fool, that's the long and short of it. But a Blount's a Blount after all. I owe something to my ancestors. My word to my father ought not to be an empty breath. Yet here I am, with all the interests of life pulling one way—wait till you've a boy five weeks old by a wife you'd be cut in little pieces for, and you'll know, sir,—and a dead father and a dead creed pulling the other. I knew what was coming, and I've talked about it and thought about it till my head's like a bee−hive. Now, sir, give me your advice!”

“I have joined the standard of your Prince,” I said.

“Damme, sir, you mock me. That's not advice. That's torture.”

“I have turned my back on the creed of my life and on every sound instinct in me,” I continued.

He stopped his walk and looked intently at me.

“I have ancestors whose memory I cherish, and I have torn up their work as if it were a scrap of paper covered with a child's meaningless scribble.”

Sir James stepped up to the table, his fine face alive with emotion.

“For what?” he asked.

I rose and looked straight into his eyes.

“For a woman,” I whispered, very low but very proudly.

Our hands met across the table in a hard grip.

“You have done well, sir!” he said. “I asked you to give me advice. You have set me an example.”

He sat down again, and looked hopefully at the fire and then moodily at Master Freake.

“There is this unfortunate difference between Mr. Wheatman's case and mine. I have, and he has not, given my plain word to a father.”

“I admit that is a striking difference,” said Master Freake. “I am no Jesuit, however, and cannot decide cases of conscience. I deal with business problems only, which are all cut and dry, legal and formal. When I make a promise in the way of business I always keep it precisely and punctually, for the penalty of failure to do so is a business man's death —bankruptcy.”

“There's such a thing as moral bankruptcy,” said Sir James gloomily.

“Very likely,” replied Master Freake.

“This is all nothing whatefer but words, words, words,” said the Welshman. “And words, my goot sirs, are indeed no goot whatefer. Sir James's head is wrapped up in a mist of words, words, words, and indeed he cannot see anything whatefer. I am not a man of words, and what you call 'em—broblems.”

“Very good,” said I.

“Indeed it is goot,” said he. “To hell with your words and your broblems. They are of no use whatefer, whatefer. Our good friend, Sir James, is up to his neck in broblems like a man in a bog, and he cannot move. Now I have not your broblems. To hell with your broblems. My Cousin Wynne is full of 'em, and he's still gaping up at the cloud on Snowdon, while I'm here, ready. I say plain: if the Prince cross south of the Trent I will join him.”

“Why the Trent?” said I.

“It is my mark. It is my way of knowing what I will do. It is all so simple. Indeed I am a simple man, not a

broblem in my brain, none whatefer, I tell you plain. It is as this—so. If the Prince cross the Trent, say I to myself, well and goot. He do his share. It is time for me to do mine. It is better indeed, I tell you plain, to have it settled by a simple thing like the Trent than to have it all muddled up by your broblems. I can sing you off my ancestors by dozens, right back to the standard−bearer of the great Llewellyn, but they're all dead, and indeed I'm not going to poke about among their bones to find out what to do. I look at your pretty river, and I wait."

Sir James had looked at him during this harangue with unconcealed impatience.

"I sent a letter to Chartley of Chartley Towers," he said, "one of us, and a strong one by all accounts. At any rate, my father always reckoned him as such. So I asked him guardedly what he thought, and his reply was, 'The chestnut is on the hob. I am waiting to see whether it jumps into the fire or into the fender.' I cannot decide by appealing to rivers or nuts. There's much more in it than that."

Fate snatched the problem out of his hands. Without a tap, without a word, the door of the room was flung open, and a dozen troopers filed swiftly and silently in, and covered us with their carbines. An officer, sword in hand, pushed through a gap in their line and stepped half a dozen paces towards us. He saluted us ceremoniously with his sword and said, "In the King's name!" Behind the line a man in citizen clothes hovered uncertainly, and dim as the light was I made him out only too plainly. It was the Government spy, Weir. My goose was cooked. I had played for life's highest stake, and thrown amb's ace. It was good−bye to Margaret.

The Welshman stuck to his chair, stolid as his native hills. Master Freake, whose back was to the new−comers, made a swift half turn, and then he, too, settled down again as indifferently as if the interruption had only been old Inskip with the bedward candles. Blount leaped to his feet, livid with rage, and strode up to the officer.

"My Lord Tiverton, what does this intrusion mean?" he demanded.

"It means," was the composed reply, "that if any one of you makes the slightest attempt to resist, he will be shot out of hand. Close up, lads, and cover your men!"

The order was obeyed briskly and exactly. The three on the left of the line attended to me, and I sat there, toying with a wine−glass for appearance sake, though the three brown barrels levelled straight and steady at my head made my heart rattle like a stone in a can. These were none of Brocton's untrained grey−coats, but precise, disciplined veterans in blue tunics and mitre−shaped hats, white breeches and high boots, belted, buttoned, and bepouched. It was almost a compliment to be shot by such tall fellows.

Seeing we were all harmless, the officer dropped his military preciseness as if it were an ill−fitting garment. He was the daintiest, handsomest wisp of a man I had ever set eyes on, and looked for all the world like an exquisite figure in Dresden china come to life. He could not have had much soldiering—the air and aroma of the London *salon* still hung closely around him—and he was so very self−possessed that he was play−acting half his time, doing everything with a grace and relish that were highly diverting. It took all my pride in my new hat out of me to see this desirable little picture of a man.

"I assure you, my dear Sir James," he said, "that it's a damned annoying thing to me to have to act so unhandsomely. Stap me! I shouldn't like it myself, but law's law and duty's duty, and so on, you know the old tale, and I'm obleeged to do it."

He opened his snuff−box and offered it to Sir James, who brusquely waved it aside, saying, "Your explanation, if you please, my lord!"

"Damme, don't be peevish! Smoke the Venus in the lid? Isn't she a sparkler? Wish I'd lived in the times when ladies lay about on seashores like it! I hate these damned crinolines. Saw Somerset in 'em in the Pantiles. Could have pushed her over and trundled her like a barrel."

"My lord," reiterated Blount, "I await your explanation."

"Boot's on the other leg," he chirped. "A'nt I pouched you all cleverly, stap me, seeing the ink on my commission's hardly dry? Didn't think it was in me!"

"I will take the authority of your commission as sufficient, my lord, the times being what they are. But will you be good enough to tell me why you come?"

"Gadso! Certainly! There's a dirty rascal in pewter buttons behind there —come here, sir, and let Sir James see your ugly face!—who says you're a disloyal person, a traitor, and so forth. I don't believe him. I wouldn't crack a flea on his unsupported testimony, but he's in the know of things, and showed me a commission from Mr. Secretary, calling on His Majesty's liege subjects, etc., you know the run of it, and I was bound to look into it.

Charges are charges, stap me if they a'nt. Don't come too near, pig's eyes! Out with your tale!”

His lordship plainly disliked the whole business, and it was a very awkward thing for Sir James that I was here, a circumstantial piece of evidence against him. I looked straight into Weir's eyes as he came forward, ungainly and uncertainly, smiling half his dirty teeth bare, and mopping his yellowy face with a dirty handkerchief. To my astonishment he made not a single sign of recognition. I was his trump card, and he left me unplayed.

“Sir James is a known Jacobite, my lord!” he quavered.

“Quite right, Mr. Weir, and if you propose to keep me out of bed these cold nights calling on known Jacobites, stap my vitals, Mr. Weir, if I don't have you flung into a pond with a brick tied round your sweaty neck like an unwanted pup. Anything else?”

“This is a Jacobite plot, my lord. There's scheming and plotting against our gracious lord the King agoing on here, my lord.”

“I'll e'en have a closer look at 'em. Plots are damned interesting things, stap me if they a'nt, and I'm glad to see one. Here's a likely young fellow,” striding up and examining me. “His is a plot in a meat−pie, it seems. There was one in a meal−tub once, I remember, so the meat−pie does look mighty suspicious, Mr. Weir. We're getting on. And here's a plotter toasting his toes. Not an intelligent member of the cabal. Stap me, if he a'nt asleep! I must circumambulate and have a quiz at him.”

He walked gaily in his play−acting way round Master Freake's chair on to the hearth and then turned and took a peep at him. As soon as he had done so he gave a great shout, and then, recovering himself, burst into a roar of laughter. He clapped his hands on his knees and fairly swayed with merriment. Master Freake looked at him with a sedate half−smile, and said, “How d'ye do, my lord?”

“Very well, thankee!” cried his lordship gaily, too gaily. “Damme! It's the funniest thing that's happened since Noah came out of the Ark. Come here, spy! Mean to tell me this is a Jacobite?”

As the spy crept near, Master Freake stood up, wheeled round on him smartly, and said, “How d'ye do, Turnditch?”

“Stap me!” cried his lordship. “His name's Weir!”

“He will know me better if I call him Turnditch,” said Master Freake icily.

He spoke unmistakable truth. I could see the shadow of the gallows fall across the man's face. What stiffening there was in him oozed out, and he stood there wriggling in an agony of apprehension, like a worm in a chicken's beak. Master Freake knew him to the bottom of his muddy soul. My Lord Tiverton was a man of another mould, but he too was in the hands of his master. Plain John Freake, citizen of London, had taken a hand in this game of fate, and had thrown double six.

This noble room had seen the agonizings and rejoicings of a dozen generations of the sons of men, but nothing to surpass this scene in living interest. They come back to me now—the line of blue−and−white troopers, still with levelled carbines; the stolid Welshman, as indifferent as Snowdon; the dapper nobleman, still polished and lightsome, no longer play−acting but rather vaguely anxious; the high−minded troubled Jacobite, fear for his wife and babe gnawing at his heart; the spy, Weir or Turnditch, with the noose he had made for another drawn round his own neck; Master John Freake, the quiet, Quakerlike merchant, whose power was rooted deep in those far haunts of the world's trade, so that we were here shadowed and protected by the uttermost branches thereof. Last of all I remember myself, with my heart thrumming good−morrow to Margaret.

“Come now, Houndsditch, or Turndish, or whatever it is,” said his lordship. “Precisely what have you to say?”

The poor devil had nothing to say. He was aflame to be off and out of Master Freake's eyesight. He choked up something about mistakes, and zeal, and forgiveness.

“That's enough! Out you go, the whole damn lot of you!” cried my lord. These not being familiar military words of command, the men stuck there like skittles. “Ground arms, or whatever it is!” he continued. “About turn! Quick march!”

Their sergeant took charge of them and they filed out. Sir James followed them and became their host, routing out servants to wait on them.

As soon as the door was closed on Sir James, his lordship hastened to Master Freake's side, and entered into low and earnest conversation with him. I walked across to the folios, hoping to find amongst them an *editio princeps* of Virgil, but was recalled by a loud “Oliver” from Master Freake.

“Oliver,” he said, when I reached his chair, “I should like you to know the most noble the Marquess of Tiverton!”

I bowed, and his lordship bowed in reply, and said light and pleasant things about our meeting. Then, vowing he was monstrous hungry, he tackled the venison pasty, summoning me to sit opposite him.

“Gadso! I am sharp−set,” he said, and indeed he ate with the zeal of a plough−lad. He pushed me over his snuff−box, which nearly made me sneeze before I took the snuff.

“It really is a masterpiece,” he said, in a pause between pasty and pie. “I shall never hear the last of it at the 'Cocoa Tree' and White's. Stap me, I shan't want to! It's too good. The tale will keep my memory green when that old mummy, Newcastle, is dust at last.”

“What tale?” said I.

“D'ye know why, a month ago, I badgered Newcastle into getting me a company in the Blues?”

“Not the faintest idea!”

He leaned across the table and, from under cover of me, nodded towards Master Freake, now talking with the Welsh−man. “To get out of his way!” he whispered.

I looked incredulous, whereupon his lordship tapped his pocket significantly.

“He's a damned good fellow. He gave me another six months without a murmur. Wish I'd known! There'd have been no campaigning for me. I prefer the Mall!”

So he said now, yet he was as steady as a wall and as bold as a lion at Culloden. He came of a great stock, and greatness was natural to him. The play−acting and gaming was only the fringe that Society had tacked on to him. It lessoned me finely to see him when Sir James came back into the room. Tiverton knew the position by instinct.

“Sir James,” he said, “I crave a word with you.”

“At your service, my lord.”

“I will be frank,” continued his lordship. “I ask no questions. I make no inferences. I simply point out that the spy fell to pieces because he found Mr. Freake here.”

“I observed so much, my lord!”

“I don't know why,” said the Marquess dubiously.

“I could hang him at the next assizes,” interrupted Master Freake.

“I see. He doesn't want to be hanged, of course. No one does. It's a perfectly natural feeling. So he crumpled up at the prospect.”

“Yes, my lord,” said Sir James.

“I allowed him to crumple up, and I took full advantage of the fact. You saw so much?”

“I did.”

“Now, Sir James, you, as a Blount, that is, as a man bearing an honoured name, are under the strictest obligation to me to see that I can say, if my conduct is challenged, that I saw nothing here because there was nothing to see. I have put myself absolutely in your power, Sir James. Whoever else joins the Prince, you must not, or you take my head along with you.”

It was well and truly said, and there was no posing about it. Sir James Blount's problem was settled. He taught me something too, for all he did was to put out his hand.

“There's an end of Tundish!” said Tiverton, grasping it firmly. “And it's the best end too, for the Highland army hasn't a snowball's chance in hell.”

He turned at once to banter me on my indifference to art, seeing that I had sniffed at a miniature by one of the most famous artists at the French Court. I let him rattle on, for my eye was on Sir James, who was rolling something in his hands. A moment later the Prince's letter went up in a tongue of flame and burnt along with it the Jacobitism of the Blounts.

A knock at the door interrupted his lordship's valuation of art and artists of the French school, and his sergeant entered to say that his men were in the saddle.

“Campaigning be damned!” said his captain wearily.

“Beg pardon, my lord,” added the sergeant, “but Mr. What's−his−name has cut off.”

“Good riddance. He's gone back to his crony at the 'Black Swan.'“

“Yes, my lord. T'other's a sergeant in my Lord Brocton's dragoons.”

“Ah, I saw they were hob−and−nob together. A fellow with a ditch in his face you could lay a finger in!”

Fortunately for me, the Marquess was busy with a last glass of wine. Here was ill news with a vengeance. I had got out of the smoke into the smother.

“My lord,” said Master Freake, “there is a man of mine, one Dot Gibson, at the 'Black Swan,' and I shall be greatly beholden to you if you will let your sergeant carry him a note of instructions from me.”

“Stap me! I'll take it myself,” cried his lordship heartily.

Master Freake went to a table to write the note. I knew now who it was that had given me the warning. My lord pocketed the note and we all crept quietly down to the main door to see him off. The guards made a gallant show in the brilliant moonlight, and Master Freake, taking my arm, dragged me out to watch them canter across the stretch of meadow, and drop out of sight down the hill.

“Sleep in peace, Oliver,” he said. “Dot Gibson will give us early news of the movements of the enemy.”

Then we strolled back, talking of the Colonel and Margaret.

CHAPTER XIX. WHAT CAME OF FOPPERY

It was eight by the clock next morning before I set about my third commission. To begin with, the bed pulled, and small wonder, since I had not slept in a bed since leaving home. Then I took my fill of the books, finding among them no less a prize than the *editio princeps* of Virgil, printed at Rome in 1469, which it was hard to let go. Next there was Baby Blount to be waited upon, and his mother, a pretty, appealing lady, with the glory of motherhood about her like a fairy garment. Part of the ceremonial was the putting of Master Blount into my arms, which was done very gingerly, with abundant cautions and precautions against my crushing or dropping him. He had a skin like white satin and a silvery down on his charming little head. Altogether I thought him a most desirable possession for a man to have, and wished he was mine, particularly when, to his father's outspoken chagrin, instead of puling he stared steadily at me with big blue eyes and smiled.

"Precious ikkle ducksy−wucksy," said his mother.

"Ugly ikkle monkey−wonkey," cried his father. "Why the deuce can't he smile at me?"

"Try him!" said I, handing him over to Sir James, glad to be free of the responsibility.

Baby Blount looked at his father and smiled again, and it was a revelation to me of the deepest and finest feelings of a man's heart to see how ravished Sir James was with this first smile of his baby boy's.

"It's you that's changed, James, not our little darling," said his wife. "He'll always smile at a face as happy as yours is this morning."

I lingered through these delightful moments over an old book and a new baby with an easy conscience, for Master Freake had brought me news which made my third task much easier. I had not told him what I had in hand to do, thinking it unfair to force the knowledge on him, but he must have made a good guess at it, for he came to tell me that the latest news from Stone was that the Duke was moving south again at top speed, with the intention of getting between the Prince and London if he could. He told me further that Charles had joined Murray at Ashbourne in the small hours, and that their reunited forces had started out for Derby. In all these important matters he was, as is obvious enough now, fully and exactly informed, and I expressed my admiration of his thoroughness.

"Business, my dear Oliver, nothing but business. Some great man of old time has said 'Knowledge is power.' I'm expanding that a little to fit these modern days. That's all."

"How does the maxim run now, sir?"

"Knowledge is money and money is power," said he, with a dry smile.

Then, as to matters small in themselves but of more immediate concern to me, he told me that his man, Dot Gibson, had reported that the spy, Weir, had at an early hour ridden off towards Stafford, while the sergeant of dragoons was still lurking at the "Black Swan." There had been long consultations between them as if they were acting in concert.

This was likely to be the case. It was a noteworthy fact that the spy had seen me, and had had an opportunity of denouncing me, before Master Freake had bowled him over. There was, therefore, reason to suppose that he would in any case have remained silent about me—the one man against whom his evidence was overwhelming. The sergeant of dragoons would, of course, be only too glad to see me out of action, dead for choice, but in jail as a useful alternative, yet the opportunity of putting me there had been let slip. I could not, try how I would, work out any reasonable explanation of their conduct.

I bade good−bye to the Grange, going off with a pressing invitation in my ears to return as soon as possible. Master Freake walked at my saddle till we were out of earshot of the group in the open doorway.

"We meet again at Derby, Oliver," he said, holding out his hand.

"That's good news, sir. I shall be there by six o'clock to−night."

"Keep a good look out for the sergeant. He and his precious master mean to have you if they can. They've a heavy score against you, lad."

"It will be heavier before the account's settled, sir."

"You shall have your tilt at 'em, Oliver. You'll enjoy it, and I've no fear as to the result. But take care! Ride in the middle of the road, and keep your eye on every bush. Brocton has half a regiment of thorough−paced

blackguards at his service and will compass hell itself to fetch you down. What about money?"

"I've plenty and to spare," I answered, "thanks to your generous loan."

"No loan, lad, but my first contribution to the expenses of—what shall we say for safety? Your tour. How will that do?"

"Nay, sir—"

"Yea. Oliver, and no more said. My favourite rate is ten per cent. You've let me off with a paltry two."

"I do not like joking in money matters, sir."

"John Freake joking in money matters?" said he, smiling. "Tell it not when you get to town, Oliver, or you'll be the ruin of a hard−won reputation. I sent you sixty guineas odd."

"Yes, sir."

"Which is, to be precise, slightly less than two per cent of what you saved me when you snatched me out of the dirty grip of Brocton's rascals. I had a good thick slice of his lordship's patrimony in my pocket. Off you go, lad! Sultan is impatient at my trifling. So ho! You beauty! Good−bye!"

"Good−bye, sir!" I cried heartily, swinging my new hat in a grand bow.

* * * * *

At three o'clock in the afternoon, having ridden hard and far without bite or sup, I came out in a little hamlet huddled about the great London road where it ran along the hem of a forest, and drew rein before the "Seven Stars." I was to be in presence with my report at six o'clock, and, as Derby was only fifteen miles off and the road one of the best, there was ample time for Sultan and me to take the rest and refreshment we both stood in need of.

I was, too, in need of quiet and leisure to get my report straightened out in my mind ready for delivery. The largeness and looseness of my commission left everything to my discretion, with the vexatious result that I had discovered nothing. I had, indeed, carried out my orders. I had been so far west of Derby that I had seen the famous spires of Lichfield cutting into the sky like three lance−heads, and had learned on abundant and trustworthy evidence that the Duke's forces there were leaving for the south, under orders to march with all speed to their original camp at Merriden Heath. This squared exactly with Master Freake's news, and was all the stock of positive information I had got together.

Of the kind of news the Prince would best like to hear there was none. Of preparations to join him, none. Of open well−wishers to his cause, none. The time when the Stuart banner could rally a host around it had gone beyond recall. There was no violent feeling the other way. People simply did not care. The old watchwords were powerless. The old quarrel had been revived in a world that had forgotten it, and would not be reminded of it. It was Charles and his Highlanders against George and his regiments, and as the latter were sure to win, nobody bothered. It is the strange but exact truth that the only sign I discovered of the great event in progress, was to come across a group of four respectable men of the middle station in life bargaining with an innkeeper for the hire of a chaise, in which they meant to drive to watch the Highlanders march by. They were very keen to bate him a shilling, and as indifferent as four oysters to the issues at stake.

Riding into the inn−yard, I shouted to the host to get me his best dinner, and, while it was preparing, I overlooked the grooming and baiting of Sultan. I left him comfortable and content, and strolled indoors to look after my own needs.

Though on the London road, and only fifteen miles from the scene of action, the inn was quiet. I learned from the host that a courier had galloped through an hour before, spurring southwards, and cried out from the saddle that the bare−legs were only five miles from Derby when he left. Earlier in the day a cart had driven through loaded up with the gowns of the town dignitaries, "going to Leicester to be done up," explained the host, delighted with his own shrewdness.

A hunger−bitten traveller with a good dinner in front of him commonly pays no attention for the time being to anything else. I found two men in the guest−room, and, after a civil greeting, which made one of them open his eyes and mouth very uncivilly, I sat down to eat, very content with the fare set before me.

As my hunger steadily abated before a steady attack on a cold roast sirloin of most commendable quality, I began to take more interest in the two men. In fact, more interest in them was forced on me by the beginnings of a pretty quarrel between them, and by the time I had got to the cheese, they, utterly regardless of my presence, were at it hammer and tongs. The row was about a horse−deal lately passed between them, and there are few things men can quarrel about more easily or more vigorously. The yokel who had gaped at me, had been cheated by his

companion, and was accordingly resentful.

Two men more at odds in outward appearance could not easily have been found. The gaper was plain country, a big, bulky man, with a paunch that, as he sat, sagged nearly to his knees, a triple chin, and a nose with a knobly end, in shape and colour like an overripe strawberry. His companion was a little fellow, lean and sharp−cut, with a head like a ferret's. We country−siders know your Londoner. Many an hour I had sat under the clump of elms at the lane−end and watched the travellers. Hence, doubtless, my taste in fashionable head−gear, like this of mine, lately belonging to Swift Nicks, now disposed carefully on the table at my side. I would have wagered it against Joe Braggs' frowsy old milking−cap that the little man was a Londoner.

Little as he was, his cold, calculating anger overbore his antagonist, who was no great hand at stating his case, good as it was.

“The landlord knows me and knows the gelding,” said the little man. “You know less about horses than a Mile End tapster. Fetch him in, and let him decide. I suppose you rode him!”

“What a God's name, d'ye think I bought him for, Mr. Wicks? To look at?”

“By the look of you I should think you bought him as a present for a baby. Sixteen stone six if you're an ounce, and riding a two−year−old! Damme, no wonder he throws out curbs! Fetch the landlord, I tell ye!”

Out burst the fat man in a great fury, and in a minute or two came back with the landlord and an ostler. Then the wrangle became hotter and more amusing than ever.

Finally, the little man, losing all patience, drew a pistol, whereon the big man ran backwards, shrieking “Murder!” Not heeding where he was going, he tumbled up against my table, and jammed it hard against my midriff.

I attempted to rise but was too late. The fat man seized my wrists, the landlord and the ostler ran round, and pinned me to the chair, and the little man held the barrel of the pistol to my forehead.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Swift Nicks!” said he.

I dare say my liver was turning the colour of chalk, but, though I'm too easily frightened, I'm always too proud to show it, which has unjustly got me the character of being a brave man.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Too−swift Wicks!” I retorted.

“What d'ye mean?” he asked, plainly disconcerted.

“I mean,” said I, “that the zeal of your office hath eaten you up.”

“What the hell does he mean?” he asked, appealing to the company.

“Damn my bones if I know,” answered the host. “I've 'eerd parson say sommat like it in church a Sundays. He's one of these 'ere silly scholards.”

“They do say as how Swift Nicks is a scholard,” put in the ostler wisely.

“There's no time for chattering,” said I. “Take me at once before a justice. That's the law, and you know it. I warn you that any delay will be dangerous. My cocksure friend here is already in for actions for assault, battery, slander, false imprisonment, and the Lord knows what. My gad, sir, I'll give you a roasting at the assizes. Take me off at once to the nearest magistrate. I'll have the law on you before another hour's out.”

My energy flustered the Londoner, who had sense enough to know the peril of his being wrong, but the fat man, dull as an ox, cheered him on.

“He's Swift Nicks right enough, Master Wicks,” he said. “Pocket full of pistols, four on 'em; a chap of the right size, a matter of six feet odd; hereabouts, where he is known to be; speaks like a gentleman; and, damme, I saw Swift Nicks myself with my own eyes not two yards off, and that's Swift Nicks' hat or I'm a Dutchman; I know'd it again the minute he walked into the room.”

“Damn the hat!” cried I heartily enough, but feeling very crestfallen at this telling piece of evidence against me.

The little man snatched it up and looked carefully at the inside of it, a thing I had never done, being wrapped up in its outside.

“There y'are!” he cried triumphantly. “'S. N. His hat.' What more d'ye want?”

“I want the nearest magistrate,” cried I.

“Well, Mr. Wicks,” said the fat man, “he can easily have what he wants. It's only a matter o' two mile to the Squire's.”

“Squire'll welly go off 'is yed,” remarked the host. “He's that sot on seeing Swift Nicks swing.”

“Then he'll very likely go bail for Mr. Wicks,” said I.

“Will he?” said Mr. Wicks sourly.

“If he don't,” I retorted, “you'll spend the night in Leicester jail.”

“They do say as 'ow Swift Nicks is a rare plucked 'un,” said the ostler.

“Then they're liars,” said I.

I was handcuffed and put on Sultan, with my feet roped together under his belly. Then we started off, and the whole village, which had dozed in peace with the Highlanders only five hours off, turned out gaily and joyously to see Swift Nicks. The landlord left his guests, and the ostler his horses, to go with us, and at least a score of villagers, mostly women, joined in and made a regular pomp of it. Once or twice we met a man who cried, “What's up?” and at the response, “Swift Nicks,” he added himself to the procession and was regaled, as he trudged along, with an account of the affray at the inn. My capture was exceedingly popular, and they gloated to my face over the doom in store for me, wrangling like rooks as to the likeliest spot for my gibbet. The majority fixed it at the Copt Oak, where, as they reminded me with shrill curses, I had murdered poor old Bet o' th' Brew'us for a shilling and sixpence. It was a relief to hear the host shout to Master Wicks, “Yon's th' Squire's!”

We trooped up to a fair stone house of ancient date with a turret at the tip of each wing. My luck was clean out. The Squire was not yet back home from hunting, for he went out with the hounds every day the scent would lie. He had ridden far, or was belated, or his horse had foundered, and there was no telling, said his ruddy old butler, when he would be back. So the villagers were driven off like cattle, Sultan was stabled, and we five were accommodated in the great hall, for the host and the ostler stayed on the ground that so dangerous a villain as Swift Nicks wanted a strong guard. They put me under the great chimney and sat round me, in a half circle, each man with a loaded pistol in one hand and a jug of ale in the other. The Squire's lady came in and stood afar off examining me, and I saw that she was in deadly fear of me, handcuffed and guarded as I was.

Over an hour crawled by, taking with it my last chance of getting into Derby, with my task accomplished, by six o'clock. What would Margaret think of me? Her obvious pride in the honour the Prince had conferred upon me by selecting me as his personal helper, had been a great delight to me, and now I had failed him and disquieted her. The thought made me rage, and I gave my captors black looks worthy of any tobie−man on the King's highway.

At last relief came in the shape of the Squire's youngest son, a stout lad of some twelve years old, who raced in, rod in hand, and made up to me without a trace of fear. He was in trouble about his rod, having snapped the top joint in unhandily dealing with a fine chub. After some wrangling, I got my hands freed, and set about splicing the joint.

“They do say,” said I mockingly, “as how Swift Nicks is a good hand at splicing fishing−rods.”

“I never 'eerd tell of that'n,” said the stolid ostler.

“Are you really Swift Nicks, sir?” asked the lad, looking steadily at me with frank, innocent eyes.

“No more than you are Jonathan Wild or Prester John, my son,” I answered.

“Then who are you?” he persisted.

“I'm a poor splicer of fishing−rods. I get my living by riding about the country on a fine horse, with one pair of pistols in my holsters and another pair in my pocket, looking for nice little boys with broken fishing−rods, and mending 'em—the rods, not the boys—so that father never finds it out and the rod's better than ever it was. How big was the chub?”

“That big!” said he, holding his hands about two feet apart.

“The great advantage, my son, of having your rod mended by me is that ever afterwards you'll be able to tell a chub from a whale.”

“Sir,” said he proudly, “a Chartley never lies.”

“Of course,” said I, “it's hard to say exactly how big a fish is when you've missed him. So your name's Chartley. Is this Chartley Towers?”

“It is,” said he, with a taking boyish pride ringing in his voice. “We are the Chartleys of Chartley Towers. We go back to Edward the Third.”

Did ever man enjoy such fat luck as mine? I had been as hard beset as a nut in the nutcrackers. To prove that I was not Swift Nicks I should have to prove that I was Oliver Wheatman. The Bow Street runner would see to that, for, as Swift Nicks, I was worth fifty guineas to him, a sum of money for which he would have hanged half the

parish without a twinge. Cross or pile, I should lose the toss. Drive away the cart! Such had been my thoughts, and now a lad's young pride had snatched me out of danger. I grew quite merry over the splicing, and told young Chartley all about my fight with the great jack.

The job was near on finished when there was a rattle of hoofs without, and, a minute later, the door was flung open and in swept a torrent of yapping foxhounds, followed by a big, hearty, noisy man in jack−boots and a brown scratch bob−wig.

“Dinner! Dinner!” he shouted to his wife, who came in to meet him. “The best run o' the year, lass! Thirty miles before he earthed, the dogs running breast−high every yard of it, and the very devil of a dig−out! There was only me and parson and young Bob Eld o' Seighford in at the death. Dinner, dinner, my lass! I could eat the side of a house. Hallo, damme! What art doing here, Jack Grattidge?”

The question was put to the host, who was shuffling down the hall to meet him. The Squire slashed the dogs silent with his half−hunter to catch the reply.

“Please, y'r honour,” said the host, “we've copped Swift Nicks.”

“By G—! You a'nt!”

“We 'an,” declared the host.

“Hurrah!” roared the Squire. “That's news! I owe you a guinea for it, Jack.”

He clumped up to the hearth, crying out as he came, “Show me the black, bloody scoundrel! I'd crawl to London on my hands and knees to watch him turned off.”

Seeing me engaged in the innocent task of mending his lad's fishing−rod, with the lad himself at my knees intent on the work, he took Mr. Wicks for the highwayman, and cursed and swore at him hard enough to rive an oak−tree. He was, indeed, so hot and heady that it was some minutes before his mistake could be brought home to him. By the time he realized that the man mending the rod was Swift Nicks, he had fired off all his powder, and only stared at me with wide−open eyes.

“I suppose,” said I, very politely, “that, as you've been hunting, the chestnut is still on the hob.”

“I'm damned!” says he, and flops down into his elbow−chair.

* * * * *

In the end we made a treaty, to Mr. Wicks' great disgust, who saw the guineas slipping through his fingers. Nor was the Squire less aggrieved at first, for clearly it was to him a matter of high concern to nail Swift Nicks.

“What's it matter to us here who's got a crown on his head in London?” he said. “London−folk care nothing for us, and we care nothing for them. But Swift Nicks does matter. We want him hung. No man about here with any sense bothers about your politics except at election−times, when politics means a belly full of beer and a fist full of guineas for every damned tinker and tallow−chandler in Leicester. But you, or that bloody villain Swift Nicks, if you a'nt him, keep us sweating−cold o' nights. To hell with your politics! Hang me Swift Nicks!”

The terms of our treaty were that I was to remain peaceably and make a night of it, giving my word to make no attempt to escape or harm anyone. In the meantime, and at my proper charges, a post was to be sent to fetch Nance Lousely and her father to give evidence on my behalf.

“DEAR GHOSTIE,”—I wrote to her,—“I am in great danger because a red−nosed man vows I am Swift Nicks. I want you and your father to come and prove he's an ass. If you don't I am to be hung on a gibbet at a place called the Copt Oak, and I can't abide gibbets, for they are cold and draughty. So come at once, my brave Nance!—Your friend,

“O. W.”

A groom was fetched and I told him how to get to Job Lousely's. He was well mounted from the Squire's stables and set off. However quickly he did his business, it would be many hours before he could be back. So I settled down to make a night of it.

There was nothing original in the Squire's way of making a night of it. The parson who had been in at the death and who, during the settlement of my affair, had been busy in the stables, now joined us at dinner. He was but lately come from Cambridge, at which seat of learning the chief books appeared to be Bracken's *Farriery* and Gibson on the *Diseases of Horses*, with Hoyle's *Whist* as lighter reading for leisured hours. He was a hard rider, a hard swearer, and a hard drinker, and, after being double japanned, as he called it, by a friendly bishop, had been pitchforked by the Squire into a neighbouring parish of three hundred a year in order that the Squire's dogs and hounds, and the game and poachers on the estate, might have the benefit of his ministrations. He had, however,

sense enough to buy good sermons. “At any rate the women tell me they're good,” explained the Squire. “I can't say for myself, for Joe's a reasonable cock, and always shuts up as soon as I wake up.”

The Bow Street runner, Mr. Wicks, and the red−nosed petty constable of the hundred, who answered to the name of Pinkie Yates, were of the party. I ate little and drank less, but the others emptied the bottles at a great pace and were soon hot with drink. One brew, which the huntsmen quaffed with much zest, I insisted, out of regard for my stomach, on passing round untouched, though the men of law took their share like heroes, and, I doubt not, thought they were for once hob−nobbing with the gods. The manner of it was thus. The parson drew from his pocket a leg of the fox they had killed that day, and, stinking, filthy, and bloody as it was, squeezed and stirred it in a four−handled tyg of claret. In this evil compound the Squire solemnly gave us the huntsman's toast:

“*Horses sound. Dogs hearty,*
Earth's stopped, and Foxes plenty.”

The parson then hiccoughed a song for which he should have been put in the stocks, after which Mr. Wicks, with three empty bottles and three knives to stand for the gallows, gave us a vivid account of the turning−off of the famous Captain Suck Ensor, who kicked and twitched for ten minutes before his own claimed him.

It was five o'clock next morning before my courier returned with Nance Lousely and her father. I had gone to sleep in the Squire's elbow−chair before the hall fire, with the zealous thief−takers in attendance, turn and turn about, as sentries over me, fifty guineas being well worth guarding. The butler watched at the door, wakefully anxious to earn the crown I had promised him. The noise he made in unchaining and unbolting the door awakened me, and it warmed my heart to see Nance standing timidly just inside the hall, her hand in her father's, till she spied me, when she broke away and ran up to me.

“You knew I'd come, sir, didn't you?” she said, appealing to me more with her pretty anxious face than by her words.

“Of course, ghostie!” I replied promptly.

“Thank you, sir!” she said, with evident relief. At a trace of doubt in my words or face, she would have broken down.

“Don't be a goose, ghostie,” said I. “Sit down and get warm! And how are you. Job? Much obliged to you both.”

“We'n ridden main hard to get here, sir. Your mon didna get t'our 'ouse afore one o'clock, an' we wor on the way afore ha'f−past. Gom! We wor that'n. Our Nance nearly bust. Gom, she did that'n.”

“Your Nance is a darling,” said I, stroking her disordered hair.

At my request backed by a promise to turn the crown into half a guinea, the butler got them some breakfast. Fortunately the Squire and the parson were due at a duck−shooting ten miles off by seven o'clock, and so were stirring early. My matter was soon settled. The Squire sat magisterially in his elbow−chair, and Nance and her father told their tale, precisely as I had told it before them. It cleared me and made the thief−catchers look mightily confused and sheepish, and very relieved they were when, as a politic way of staving off awkward questions, I grandly accepted their apologies.

“I knew you weren't Swift Nicks,” said the Squire, “when I saw you mending my lad's fishing−rod. Damme, we'll get him though, before we've done.”

He invited me to join him at breakfast, where we were alone for the first time.

“Is it into the fire or into the fender?” he asked meaningly.

I was ready for him and, stopping with the carving knife half−way through a fine ham I was slicing, said, as if amazed, “Is what into the fire or into the fender?”

“The chestnut,” said he.

“The chestnut!” I retorted.

“Well, well! I don't blame you for your caution, sir. Sir James Blount sounded me and I know you know my reply. Whether fire or fender will make no difference to me, and I wouldn't miss to−day's duck−shoot to make it either.”

“I hope there'll be plenty of birds, and strong on the wing,” said I.

This ended all the talk that passed between us on the great event that had so strangely brought us together. He, the squire of half a dozen villages, went duck−shooting while the destiny of England was being settled just outside his own door.

For the second time Nance walked a space by my side to wish me good−bye.

“Nance, my sweet lass,” said I, pulling Sultan up, “do you know that dirty little ale−house near your home?”

“Where the painted woman lives, sir?”

“That very place! Now Swift Nicks is hiding there. Go back and tell the Squire you can find Swift Nicks for him, and they'll fill your pinner with guineas. You'll kiss me for a pinnerfull of guineas, won't you?”

“No, sir,” said she very decidedly.

“Then kiss me, Nance, because, though we shall never meet again, we've helped one another when we did meet.”

She put her foot on mine, and I lifted her up in my arms and kissed her red young lips and tear−stained cheeks.

“Good−bye, Nance!”

“Good−bye, sir. God bless you!”

At a bend in the road I turned to look at her again. She was standing there, looking after me, and waved her bonnet in farewell. I took off my hat and waved back, and then she was gone from sight.

“She's a good girl is Nance,” said I aloud, “and you, curse you, are the cause of all my troubles”—this to my new hat. My foppery had cost me dear. What would the Prince say to my failure? What would Margaret say? There would once more be questionings in her eyes, and the shadow of doubt on her face.

“Curse you!” I said again to the hat, and then, with a swift, strong sweep of my arm, sent it spinning into a brook.

Sultan showed his points. He did ten miles in fifty minutes by my watch, accurate timing and counting from one milestone to another.

At last the broad Trent came in sight and I rattled over Swarkston bridge, only to be pulled up on the other side by a strong post of Highlanders. My luck still held, however, for Donald was amongst them, and, on his explaining who I was, the chief in command let me pass.

Donald trotted by my side for half a mile to give me all the news. The Prince had lain all night at Derby in the Earl of Exeter's house. There had been many rumours and wranglings among the chiefs at night, a council of war was fixed for this morning, and no one knew what it was all about. There had been great doings overnight in the town, and he, Donald, had stood guard at the Prince's lodging.

“She dinged 'em a', as I tell't ye she would,” he said. “Losh, man, it was a grand sight to see her an' the bonny Maclachlan gliding ower ta flure in ta dancin'. They were like twa gowden eagles gliding in the air ower a ben wi' ta sun shinin' on it. Losh, man, I tell it ye, they're a bonny, bonny pair. Got pless 'em.”

“Good−bye, Donald! I'll push on. Damn Swift Nicks!” I cried, and gave Sultan such a dig in the flanks that he shot ahead like an arrow from a bow. I was sorry immediately, but it was more than I could stand.

CHAPTER XX. THE COUNCIL AT DERBY

It was a relief to get into the chock−full streets of the town, where thinking was impossible and good round cursing indispensable. Even with its aid in clearing a course for him, Sultan tumbled over a brace of Highlanders, two of a swarm of Maclachlans and Macdonalds who were disputing possession of a cutler's shop on the corner of Bag Street. After their native fashion, they immediately suspended their quarrel to unite against a common foe, but on a Maclachlan recognizing me as a friend, went at one another again with infinite zest, and I saw them hard at it as I turned into the market−square.

Our meagre collection of cannon had been packed here with their appendancies, and I was threading my way through them to the far side of the square, where stands Exeter House, and was within a flick of a pebble of it, when the Colonel ran out, bareheaded and eager, and came up to me.

“You young dog! What's happened?” said he.

“I've lost my hat, sir,” I replied.

“Lost your—Damme! I'll have you court−martialled yet before I've done with you. Off you come! Hello, my precious. Hitch him to the tail of yon wagon and come along. The Prince saw you from the window. Steady, my beauty! Come along, Noll! Fancy a town the size of this and not a damned pinch of Strasburg in it!”

I hurried after him through the hall and up the stairs. Something big was in hand beyond a doubt, for hall and stairs were thronged with groups of Highland leaders, and in one set, somewhat apart, I saw Murray and Ogilvie. The Colonel took no notice of the curious looks that were cast upon us, particularly me, but, after a word with the chief on duty, ushered me unceremoniously into the presence.

Charles was taking short turns up and down near the hearth, but stopped as I bowed before him.

“You've failed me!” he said bitterly.

“I have carried out your Royal Highness's commands exactly, though, to my deep regret, not punctually, but every hour I am late has been spent under arrest. In riding on your business, sir, I have ridden up to the foot of the gallows.”

I spoke quietly but crisply, for I would not be girded at unjustly, no, not by a prince. He took my meaning, and answered generously, “As I knew you would, Master Wheatman, if need were.”

The noble panelled room in which we were was set out with a long table and many chairs. At the head of the table a mean−looking man was busily writing. At the window two other men stood in earnest conversation, and these, as I learned later, were the Irishmen, Sir Thomas Sheridan and Colonel O'Sullivan.

“Leave your dispatch, Mr. Secretary, and come hither. And you, too, gentlemen!” said Charles.

So, with the Prince sitting near the fire and the four leaders ranged behind him, I stood and told my tale, cutting out all that was meaningless from their point of view. As I had expected, there was no mistaking its effect on him. I had indeed, come back empty−handed. Yet he pulled himself together and said lightly, “Well, gentlemen, if the men of the Midlands are not for me, they are certainly not against me.”

“That is a strong point in your favour, sir,” said O'Sullivan.

“When I've thrashed the Duke and got into London,” said Charles, buoyed up at once by any straw of comfort, “they'll be round me like wasps round a honey−pot. I wasn't clear last night, but Master Wheatman has decided me. I ride into London in Highland dress.”

“I applaud the decision of Your Royal Highness,” said the foxy secretary. “It is a merited compliment to your brave clansmen.” He afterwards ratted and so helped to hang some of the best of them.

“Now for your dispatch to the Marquis,” said Charles, going towards the secretary's papers. “There's time to look at it before Murray and his supports arrive.” O'Sullivan walked softly to one of the windows overlooking the square, and we followed him.

“Faith, Colonel,” said he. “The game's up if we go on.”

“It is,” said the Colonel, tapping at his box. “Damn this rappee, Oliver. I'd as lief sniff at sawdust.”

“But if the Prince wants to go on, I back him up,” added O'Sullivan.

“So do I,” said Sir Thomas.

“So do I,” echoed the Colonel, “but, damme, I shall tell him the precise truth about the military aspect of the

situation. One's my duty as a soldier just as much as the other. I haven't the least objection to dying, but be damned if I want my reputation to die with me. The most you can say of rappee, Oliver, is that it's better than nothing."

"That's just what I've been thinking, sir," said I, with equal gravity, "about my old hat."

"You're keeping that story for Margaret, you young dog, but she's bound to tell me. I was out of bed till two o'clock this morning, listening to her clatter about getting married quick, and walls of Troy, and ham and eggs. She nearly prated the top of my head off, and did not kiss me good−night till I'd told her for the seventeenth time that there was no need to worry about you. Seventeen times"—a vigorous sniff and a merry twinkle—"I counted 'em."

It was obvious nonsense, but it pained me.

"It was very kind of her, sir," I said at last.

"Humph!" said he, and turned to talk with the Irishmen. I kept a sharp look out on the square below, hoping for a glimpse of Margaret, paying no heed to the earnest conversation buzzing in my ear. Princes and dominions, and marches and battles, were nothing to me as I stood there fighting for mastery over myself.

I was pulled back from these slippery tracks of thought by the Colonel, who gripped my arm and whispered, "Here they come, Oliver."

I looked to the door and saw the chiefs filing into the room, led by Murray, with the greater ones immediately behind him and the others in due degree, till the room was fairly crowded. Charles continued his colloguing with Mr. Secretary while they disposed themselves according to their rank in council, though the Duke of Perth was pleased to take his stand on the hearth among some of the smaller sort. Sir Thomas Sheridan and Colonel O'Sullivan left us and seated themselves nearer the Prince, and when they had done so, and while there was still some noisy settling down to be done, I whispered to the Colonel, "Oughtn't I to go out now, sir?"

"I'm for going on to London," said he, grinning at me with his eyes, though he kept the face of a wooden image. "And first thing we do, Oliver, we'll lead a desperate attack, you and I, on a tobacco−man's. Damme! There's wagon−loads of Strasburg in London!"

"Suppose I start off now, sir, and mark down one or two of the primest."

"Suppose you stay where you are, lad," he replied. "You're here by rights: first, because the Prince asked ye here and has not dismissed you, and you never leave the presence of royalty till royalty kicks you out; secondly"—pausing to take a pinch of rappee that would have lifted the roof of my head off—"because you can't have less sense than some of these chatterers. Council of war! Mob of parliament−men!"

Thus it came about that, thanks to Swift Nicks, I was present at the great council which was to decide the fate of the Stuarts. I pushed behind the Colonel, so that I could now and again steal a peep for Margaret. Just at the last minute, with Charles lifting his eyes up to begin, the door opened again to admit Maclachlan, red with the haste he had been making. It made me grit my teeth to see him, for I knew why he was so hot. He had been fluttering around Margaret, and so had lost count of time. Then I stopped my gritting and started grinning. Much Margaret would think of a man who neglected his soldiering to dangle at her apron−strings!

His Royal Highness, after his usual habit, opened the Council by stating his own opinion.

"I have called you together, gentlemen," he said, "to consider our next step. The question is: Shall we march west, cut the Duke's forces in two, and so beat him, or, shall we take advantage of the fact that we are nearer London than he is, press on, and take possession of the Capital? I am strongly for the second plan."

"Damme, sir! Well put!" said the Colonel under his breath. And indeed it was so well put that the chiefs looked rather hopelessly at one another, for this was by no means the alternative that they had in mind. It was to them, as soon appeared, no choice between south and west that they had come to discuss, but the much more important choice between south and north. For a minute or two there was a muttering of Gaelic, which the Prince did not understand, at any rate, so far as the words were concerned. Then Lord George Murray rose, bowed profoundly to the Prince, and began the case for the chiefs.

"The Duke of Cumberland," he said, "was that night at Stafford with an army of ten thousand foot and two thousand horse. Mr. Wade was coming by hard marches down the east road and could easily get between His Royal Highness's army and Scotland. They had authentic news that an army was being encamped on the north of London. If, then, they marched to London they would have two armies in their rear and one in front of them, and, high as he rated the valour and prowess of the army he had the honour, under His Royal Highness, of

commanding, it was vain to suppose that they could defeat three armies each at least twice as numerous as they. None of the advantages on which they had relied when they agreed to enter England had been realized. They had received no accession of strength worth considering from the English Jacobites; the population were not friendly but at all times surly and neutral, and on all possible occasions openly hostile; the promised French invasion had not even been attempted. Scotland they had won for His Majesty and could and should keep it for him. To do this required them to return with all speed and with undiminished forces. On all these grounds he, and those for whom he spoke, implored His Royal Highness to return thither and consolidate his forces for a fresh attempt under more favourable conditions."

His lordship had spoken calmly and with no outward sign of feeling except that, as he got toward the end of his speech and his drift became open and manifest, his voice gained more and more emphasis as he saw the undisguised impatience and growing anger of Charles. The Prince paid no courteous attention to the arguments of his chief military adviser, but shot eager glances round the ring of faces, and particularly at His Grace of Perth, who was visibly flattered by this mute appeal. The Colonel, who noted all this by−play, was nettled by the Prince's indifference to military authority, and whispered, "Well done, Geordie Murray! Right as a trivet!"

The speech done, the Prince struck his clenched fist on the table and said, "I am for marching on London."

It was plain, however, that the chiefs were against him almost to a man. Murray was clearly in the right, and his military skill and experience gave him great authority. As yet there was no open murmuring against the Prince; nothing but manifest determination not to be won over by his cajoleries or threats.

"Why should we not go on?" demanded the Prince passionately. "Here we are, masters of the heart of England. A quick, bold stroke, and London is ours. The game is in our hands."

"Game?" cried a rugged, headstrong chief, Macdonald of Glencoe. "The game's up, sir, thanks to these beer−swilling English friends of your house, who are Jacobites only round a cosy fire with mugs in their hands."

"They are only awaiting an earnest of victory," said Charles.

"Waiting for us to do the work," said Glencoe bitterly, "and then blithe they'll be to hansel the profits. We can gang back to Scotland as quick as we like when we've ance got London for 'em!"

There was a growl of assent from the chiefs, but silence fell again when the venerable Tullibardine, too racked with gout to stand, took up the word.

He spoke as one who had grown old and weary and poor in the service of the exiled House. The conditions of success, he said, had always been the same: the Highland adherents of His Majesty could never hope to be more than the centre around which the real sources of strength, English support and French aid, might gather; and these had failed now as they had failed in '15. "I dare not," he concluded, "lift my voice to urge men to take risks which I am too feeble to share."

Charles put up a stout fight, but it was no use. Chief after chief had his say, and then said it again and again. Maclachlan shifted from his place near the door to the corner of the hearth and, after whispering a while with the Duke of Perth, confusedly gave his opinion in favour of going back.

He was no sort of a speaker, being ill at ease, and plainly occupied in rummaging about in his mind. Having wits, however, he stumbled on a new line of argument.

"Then, sir," he said, "there is the great port of Glasgow to be taken in. There's more ready wealth there than in any other town in Scotland, and its moneys, public and peculiar, will give you the means of raising a great army for the spring."

"Any port in a storm," said the Prince, scowling at him.

Being a Stuart, Charles did not realize that every one of these chiefs was a king−in−little, accustomed to unfettered independence of action. There were curious contrasts in him, for he was as blundering and incapable in dealing with an assembly as he was sure and brilliant in dealing with a man by himself.

Feeling began to run high. One of the chiefs jerked himself on to his feet and harangued the Prince like a master rating an apprentice. He was almost as long and thin as one of Jane's line−props, and had high, jutting cheek−bones and jaws that snapped on the ends of his sentences like a rat−trap.

"I'm for gaein' back while the road's open behint us," he said. "If we dinna, and I get back at a', which is dootfu', I shall gae back wi' barely a dozen loons to my tail, an' the Cawmbells, be damned to every man o' the name, will ride on my back for the rest of my days."

"Ye're in the right of it, Strowan," said my Lord Ogilvie. "There's too few of us for this work, but a little peat

will boil a little pot. Let us gang back and raddle the Glasgow bodies. Ye hae my advice, sir!”

Here the Prince, to my mind, made a fatal mistake. He had begun by trying to carry matters merely by the weight of his royal authority. This was ever his plan in council, and as long as things went well it served, since the chiefs, looking forward as they then did to ultimate triumph, were not willing to risk his displeasure by standing out against him. Now that they were in a tight corner this cock would fight no longer, and he made matters worse by appealing to the Irishman, O'Sullivan, for his opinion. He briefly gave it in favour of going on.

One tale will hold till another's told. O'Sullivan had a great reputation as a master of the irregular mode of fighting, which must be adopted by an army composed, like ours, of untrained men not equipped according to the rules and requirements of soldiership. But my Lord George Murray was ready for him.

“Great as Colonel O'Sullivan's reputation is, sir,” he said sweetly, “we have with us in Colonel Waynflete another soldier of great distinction. His views would be welcome, sir.”

“Yes, indeed,” said the Prince eagerly.

“For myself, sir,” said the Colonel, snuff−box open in hand, for he had been surprised with the rappee between his fingers, “I am ready to go on. I came to serve your Royal Highness, and I serve my commander as he chooses, not as I would choose myself. But when you ask me as to the military result of going on, I tell you frankly, as becomes a soldier of experience asked in Council to deliver his opinion, that it is idle to expect this present force to get to London. As you get nearer London, sir, the country becomes of a kind which your army could not successfully operate in. It would be confined to roads lined with hedges and passing through many defendable towns and villages. Your short, powerful charges would be out of the question. The English as a whole fight well, no men better; we can't rationally expect all of them to run off at a Highland yell, and with the country in their favour and London behind them, a source of constant fresh supplies to them, we should be wiped out in detail. Your Royal Highness wishes to go on, and therefore I am willing to go on, but your Royal Highness cannot capture London with the force at your disposal.”

He finished and took his snuff with zest, seeing that it was still rappee, and handed me the box with great composure.

In all they talked and wrangled for three hours, and I got very tired of it all and spent my time looking through the window for Margaret. There would be no profit in setting down more of what was said. Indeed, no fresh point was raised until the Prince argued vehemently in favour of turning off for Wales, where his adherents were supposed to be very strong.

This produced a fresh crop of speeches, all on one note—the necessity of starting back for Scotland.

The Duke of Perth had been silent so far. He had stood on the hearth, near the fire, the warmth of which he stood greatly in need of, being slight and weakly. He had turned his eyes from one speaker to another as the debate went on, and had gently rubbed the back of his head against the panelling, as if to stimulate thought. The speech of Colonel Waynflete plainly had a great effect on him, and I could see that he was making up his mind, for he continued the gentle rubbing of his head but took no note of the wrangling and jangling about the Welsh project. The storm lulled, for it had blown itself out. Everything sayable had been said times out of number.

“I am for marching back at once,” he declared in a loud voice.

I was heartily sorry for the Prince. In his mind's eye he had seen himself in the palace of his fathers with a nation repentant at his feet. He did not know England,—no Stuart ever did,—or he would have known that the wave of chivalry that had carried him so far was bound to spend itself on the indifferent English as a wave spends itself on the indifferent sands. Yet it was hard to go back, hard to know that he had done so much more than his grandfather in '89 or his father in '15, and done it in vain. His standard was proudly flaunting in the heart of England over the grave of his cause.

But he died well. “Rather than go back,” he cried, “I would wish to be twenty feet under ground!”

With a wave of his hand he dismissed the Council.

“Slip out and look after Sultan,” whispered the Colonel. “I am aide−de−camp to the Prince and cannot come. Take him to the 'Bald−Faced Stag' in the Irongate, to your right across the Square. You should find Margaret there, and Mr. Freake.”

I was edging out in the tail of the procession when Mr. Secretary, moved thereto by the Prince, sidled up to me, his sly eyes overrunning the outgoing chiefs as he came. He laid his hand on my arm, which gave me the creeps, and said, “His Royal Highness would speak with you, sir.”

He sidled back again with me behind him, wondering how far one fair kick would lift him. I stood stiff and awkward before the Prince, who, however, addressed the Colonel.

“Your speech was a shrewd blow to me, Colonel. Nay, don't protest! You did a soldier's duty by me in Council as you will do it in battle. I ask no more.”

“And I shall do no less, sir,” said the Colonel.

“Well, give me a pinch of snuff, and I'll ask your advice on another military point.”

This was the straight way to the Colonel's heart, taking snuff and talking soldiership being to him the twin boons of life.

Charles took his rappee thoughtfully and then said, “What is the best way of dealing with a solid body of the enemy with inferior forces?”

“Split 'em up and smash 'em in detail, sir.”

“What d'ye say to that, Tom Sheridan?” asked Charles.

“The oracle of Delphi could not have spoken better, sir,” replied Sir Thomas.

“Damn your oracle of Delphi, you old rascal,” cried the Prince, with great good−humour. “That's a crumb of the mouldy bread of learning you used to cram down my throat in the old days. It makes Master Wheatman writhe to hear it. The only advantage I ever got out of being a Prince was that old Tom here never dared thrash me for gulping up his rubbish.”

“Master Wheatman knows Latin enough to stock a couple of bishops, sir,” said the Colonel.

“The devil he does!” said Charles admiringly. “He'll come in handy for writing me a letter to His Holiness.”

“It's not such bad stuff as all that, sir,” said I, glad of a chance of saying something, for I had been hurt to the quick by talk that reminded me of how I had quizzed Jack's classics in Old Comfit's entry.

“To come back to the Colonel's advice,” said Charles. “I've split 'em up and now I'm going to smash 'em in detail. We're not going back, sirs, if I can help it. Master Wheatman,”—and here he naturally and unaffectedly took on a princely tone—“we appoint you our assistant aide−de−camp, and desire your attendance on our person during the day, under the more immediate authority of our excellent friend, Colonel Waynflete.”

At a sign from the Colonel, which I was lucky enough to see the meaning of, I dropped on my knee before the Prince.

“Thank you, Master Wheatman,” said Charles, in his ordinary frank way, when I rose. “You're worth a hundred rats like young Maclachlan.”

I coloured, partly with the praise and partly because I was wondering how many Smite−and−spare−nots I was worth.

I was then closely questioned about the lie of the land to the south of Stafford and Derby. After a long consultation, the Prince dismissed me, with a gracious invitation to be one of the Royal party at dinner, promising me, with a sly smile, that the company should be to my liking.

The Colonel and I withdrew. In the corridor he put me in charge of an upper servant of the household, and went to see to Sultan.

My new acquaintance was an elderly man of a solemn, soapy aspect, set off by a sober black livery and a neat wig. He took me up to a bedroom, and saw to my comfort.

“William, or whatever it is,” I began.

“William it is, sir,” said he.

“Do I look like an assistant aide−de−camp to a prince?”

He took stock of me, from my dirty boots to my bare head, and then said solemnly, “No, sir!”

“William,” said I, “but that's precisely what I am.”

“Yes, sir,” he replied.

“Therefore this is precisely your opportunity, William.”

“Yes, sir,” said he.

“William,” I went on insinuatingly, “I think you could, knowing this house so intimately as you do, make me look something like an assistant aide−de−camp to a prince. It's a tough job, William, but you'll do it. I can see it in your eye. By virtue of the power adherent to the assistant aide−de−camp of a prince, we hereby authorize you to do all things that may be necessary for the accomplishment of our purpose, and, when your task is over, you will, by a curious coincidence, find five guineas under yon candlestick. Life, William, is full of coincidences.”

“Yes, sir.”

“But not as full of guineas, William, as it should be. Set to work!”

Instead of going he stood there, gently washing his hands with imaginary soap and water, and finally said, “You will of course, sir, be very angry if I do not do as you bid me.”

“I shall, William,” said I, lathering away at my chin.

“I may take it, sir, that you'll blow my brains out if I don't.”

“Blow your—Oh, I see! Certainly!” said I, tailing off from astonishment into understanding.

The quiet humour of the man was delightful. I fetched a pistol out of my pocket and added gravely, “William, unless I am, in appearance as well as in fact, a prince's assistant aide−de−camp in half an hour, I'll blow your brains out. Now clear out, while I have a bath!”

“Thankee, sir. It'll be all right now. My lord is, I should say, just of a size with your honour.”

William was an artist and fitted me out with the nothing−too−much of exact taste. There were garments by the score that would have made a popinjay of me, but he knew better, and turned a sober young yeoman into a sober young gentlemen, and there's no harder task, as I have frequently observed since.

“Sir,” said he at length, stepping back a few paces to con me over, “in any other man I should deplore the obstinacy−excuse my plainness, sir —which declines to wear a wig, but the general result, the *tout ensemble*, as my lord would put it, is agreeable.”

“William,” I replied, “you err through ignorance—excuse my plainness, William. The best Wheatman of the Hanyards that ever lived would have burned at the stake rather than wear a wig. I've done most of the other things he would have burned for, but I'll stick by him to this extent that I'll be damned if I'll wear a wig.”

I never have, and it is no small measure due to me that the wearing of wigs is being left to lawyers and doctors, who, I understand, find it pays to look old and old−fashioned.

“Quite so, sir! A very proper sentiment,” said William, with his eye on the candlestick. “It's family pride that keeps the great families agoing, sir, and they're the backbone of the Constitution, sir!”

After this high sentence, as I was ready to go, he gravely escorted me to the door and bowed me out. I dropped my ear to the keyhole and heard the chink of the guineas. William clearly had a very pretty appreciation of the best means of keeping himself agoing. A suaver, defter rascal I have never set eyes on.

I had already so much of soldiership as to know that it is well to master the ins and cuts and roundabouts of a strange house. If an emergency comes it may be the best guide to action. “Know your ground and win your fight,” the Colonel used to say, and it's as true of a house as of a province. So I walked softly and watchfully about, and in doing so had turned sharp to the right to gain a view of the river and the gardens, when I came on the Lady Ogilvie. She was kneeling on a cushioned settle, resting her chin in her hands, and her elbows on the high back of the seat.

She turned to see who it was. Her face was clouded over, but the sun of her smile broke through in a flash, and she darted joyously at me.

“It's the incomparable one!” she cried, bubbling over with merriment. “Nay, I vow, it's the still more incomparable one. Losh, man, and ye look bonny! I'm telling it ye, and I've seen more bonny men than you've seen bullocks. Sit down and tell me where you've been and what you've done. Davie says you tell't him I was very, very guid. And so I am,” she ended complacently, “and if any man says the differ....”

“He'll do well to keep out of Davie's road and mine,” I cut in, as I was building up the cushions into a soft corner for her.

“You're an unco' guid lad,” she said, wriggling into her nest, “an' if it werena for some one I ken I'd gie ye anither kiss.”

I willingly admit that I wished Davie far enough, for she was a very dainty lady, with a mouth like an open rose−bud.

We had a long talk, for I told her all about my doings with ghost, thieves, thief−catchers, and baby Blount. She enjoyed it to the top of her bent. Then, when I had come to the end of my tale, she sobered all of a sudden, and said, “Oliver, what's going to happen to us?”

“I don't know,” said I.

“There's something in the wind I dinna like. Davie's a' for ganging back. We women ought never to have come. Davie can think o' naething but me. As if I mattered a tup's head, the silly gomeril, bless him! Now there's

your Maclachlan. He'd go to London if it was full o' deevils to fetch a stay−lace for Margaret, but he's a' for the homeward gait too!"

"The best military opinion is that it is hopeless to go on," said I.

"And I dinna think it's much better to gae back, laddie. It's a retreat. Ca' it what you like, you can mak" nae ither thing of it, and these Highland bodies, ance they retreat, will break to bits. Naething will keep the main of 'em taegither, ance they cross the Highland line again. Sae it's a black look out, Oliver, but I dinna mind ane wee bit. If I'd no been a Jacobite, I'd never hae met my Davie yonder. He's worth it a', is Davie."

"It's a hard task for any man to be worthy of your ladyship," said I, "but Davie's worthy if any man is."

"And Davie reckons you're fine," she replied, smiling. "Margaret pit him doon for three dances, and sat in a corner with him through 'em a'. I wonder the incomparable one's lugs"—I knew what she meant because she pinched one—"arena burnt off his head. You should hae seen Maclachlan ranting and raving like an auld doited tup!"

"It is pleasant to learn that Mistress Waynflete is so interested in my doings," said I, with as much coolness and aloofness as I could muster. I would at least keep my foolishness on my own side of my teeth.

"Unco pleasant, I hae nae doot," was her dry comment. And she set her red lips aslant as if she were swallowing vinegar.

I remembered my new function, and looked at my watch. I had long overrun the hour the Colonel had given me.

"Your ladyship will pardon me," said I, springing up, "but I'm overdue for duty."

"Duty?"

"Yes. His Royal Highness has appointed me assistant aide−de−camp to himself."

I spoke with much impressiveness but, to my chagrin, instead of the congratulations that were my due on such an occasion, she looked concerned and almost angry, and cried, "The very deil's in it!"

"I am sorry your ladyship is displeased," I said coldly. Scot clings to Scot, and she did not like it.

"Displeased, ye daft gomeril!" she retorted. "And I suppose you'll be pleased, and Margaret will shout for joy, if ye get a dirk in your assistant aide−de−camp's ribs ane o' these fine nights. Just understand ance for a', my friend, that a Highlander kills a man wi' as little compunction as an Englishman squashes a beetle. There's nane o' your law−and−order bodies beyont the Highland line."

"Nothing but common murderers!" said I hotly. "I have heard much of the virtues of the Highlanders of late, but this surprises me."

"Hoots! Murderers?" she cried. "No such silly Saxon whimsies. They've got as many virtues as any Englisher that ever snivelled prayer and shortened yardstick. Murderers! Hoots, my mannie! Just removers of difficulties!"

So she turned it off with a jest in her pretty way, and got up and jigged along the corridor with me after her, longing to jig it with her, but hobbled by my new dignity. I had no clear notion of an assistant aide−de−camp's duties, but felt that they required a certain solemnity of manner inconsistent with her ladyship's grasshopper ways.

In the end, she dancing and I lumbering along, we came on a cheerful group collected in the corridor below. There was the Prince, the Duke of Perth, the Lord Ogilvie, the two Irishmen, Mr. Secretary, the Colonel, a strange lady or two, and Margaret.

"I thought your ladyship was lost," said Charles, smiling.

"On the contrary, sir," she retorted, "I was found."

"The usual explanation," he commented lightly.

"A most unusual explanation, sir," she countered deftly, "for Mr. Wheatman has been explaining how it came to pass that he kissed a ghost."

"I never said any such thing," cried I, vexed to the bone.

"It wasna necessary," she said airily.

"Was it the ghost of a lady?" asked the Duke, who had been greatly amused by the dialogue.

"The question could only be asked," said Charles, "by one who has not the advantage of knowing Master Wheatman."

He laid a hand on my arm and drew me nearer. "My lord Duke," he went on, "I present to you the latest addition to my army, Mr. Oliver Wheatman of the Hanyards, the first−fruit, I am convinced, of a rich harvest from the gentry of his shire."

It was no plan of mine to cry stinking fish to a Prince who had engentried me in such distinguished company. “I'll have two blue stars and a jack in my coat−armour,” thought I, as I bowed to the Duke, who made himself singularly graceful.

There was now a general movement down the corridor, headed by the Prince with one of the unknown ladies on his arm. There was no other formal pairing though Lady Ogilvie deftly snapped up the Duke as he was coming for Margaret, and thus left her to me.

She let the last pair get a yard or two ahead of us, and then looked at me, her eyes full of laughter, curtsied, and said, “Good morrow, Sir Kiss−the−ghost!”

“Good morrow, madam,” said I stoutly.

She put her arm in mine and, as we moved off, whispered mockingly, “Sensible ghost!”

CHAPTER XXI. MASTER FREAKE KNOWS AT LAST

Dinner was a success from the Prince's point of view. The Duke was completely won over to the idea of our going on, and even the Lord Ogilvie at one time wavered before the Prince's onslaught. The Irishmen were strongly in favour of it, and Mr. Secretary, when thawed by wine, grew expansive over its advantages. I incline to think that the rascal had ratted already, and was anxious to get all he could out of the Government by leading the Prince into a trap. Trap it would have been, as Culloden plainly showed. Against English regular soldiers, resolutely led, the Highlanders would work no more miracles.

So for a space the chatter and laughter went on. Charles was already in St. James's, and the ladies were already queening it in the new Court over the renegade beauties of the old one. Even Margaret caught some of the enthusiasm, so that I whispered to her, “You beat our Kate at counting your unhatched chickens.”

Whereat she sobered all of a sudden, and whispered, “Maybe you are right, Oliver!”

“I hope for your sake they are true prophets,” I said. “I should dearly like to see you a marchioness before I go back to my farming.”

“That's one of the chickens I've not counted,” she said.

She looked at me very steadily, and then turned and plunged into the stream of conversation flowing around her.

Her father had steered clear of all awkward topics, taking for granted that we were going on. Charles got less cautious as he got surer, and moreover, as I could not but observe, he was mellowing somewhat under the brandy he was drinking. Princes commonly have no judgment of men, having never the need of noting their humours in order to mould them to their will. So now Charles bluntly attacked the Colonel again on the military aspect of the situation, which was merely butting against a stone wall.

“You must remember, Colonel,” he said, “that my Highlanders have driven the English soldiery before them like sheep. They wiped out an army of them at Gladsmuir in less than fifteen minutes, and only lost thirty men killed in doing it.”

“Sir,” said the Colonel, “give me one thousand English soldiers for a week and I'll pit them against any thousand Highlanders you like to bring against 'em.”

“Then it's a good job you're on my side,” said Charles.

“It is indeed, sir,” said the Colonel, very quietly, “and under favour, sir, you will be well advised to have your troops exercised in the best ways of charging men who don't mean to run from them. There's no military science wanted to beat men who run away from you as soon as you attack. As I understand it, your Highlander fires his piece from a good distance, throws it away, and then rushes to the attack. If the enemy stands, he catches the bayonet of the man in front of him in his leather shield, where it sticks, and so has him at mercy, and through you go like a knife through a cheese.”

“That's just how it's done, Colonel,” said Charles merrily.

“Well, sir, that's just how it wouldn't be done if I was in command against you.”

There was neither eating nor drinking going on now, except that the Prince poured out his third glass of brandy. Everybody was intent on the dialogue. Ogilvie, his hand clasping his wife's under the skirt of the napery, looked so intently at the Colonel that his face was like a figure in a Euclid book.

“How would you stop it, sir?”

It was Mr. Secretary who spoke, for Charles was sipping at his brandy.

“We're all friends here?” said the Colonel brusquely.

“All loyal to the last drop of our blood,” replied Mr. Secretary fervently.

“I dare say,” was the Colonel's dry comment, “but it's much more important at times to be loyal to the last wag of your tongue.”

“Then I only answer, as in the presence of God, for myself,” said he piously.

“Leaving God to look after Mr. Secretary,” said Charles, banging his empty glass on the table. “I'll answer for the rest. So get on with your plan, Colonel.”

“His Royal Highness has selected the easier task,” whispered Margaret in my ear.

“Well, sir,” began the Colonel, “I should say to my men: 'When the Highlanders charge, take no notice of the man who is coming straight at you. Keep your eye on his left−hand man, who is coming at your right−hand man. Don't fire at him till you can see the whites of his eyes, and if you don't bring him down with the bullet, have at him and thrust your bayonet into his right ribs. There's no buckler there, and his right arm will be up to strike. The man coming at you will be attended to in the same way by your left−hand man.' After a week's practice in that little trick, sir, I should face any charge your Highlanders liked to make, and would bet a thousand guineas to this pinch of rappee—poor stuff as it is—on stopping 'em dead in their tracks.”

“By gad! and so you would, sir!” said my Lord Ogilvie explosively.

“It sounds feasible,” said old Sir Thomas, “but fortunately Colonel Waynflete is with us, and can teach us new tricks.”

“Of course he can,” said Charles. “What do you say, Master Wheatman? You know him.”

“That old poachers make the best gamekeepers, sir,” I answered.

“*Nom de chien*,” cried the Colonel, twirling fiercely round on me. Margaret, who sat between us, laughingly pretended to protect me from him, and he thrust his snuff−box across at me.

The Prince rose, and, followed by Murray, left the room. We all stood gossiping together. Ogilvie and O'Sullivan talked very earnestly about the Colonel's trick. His Grace of Perth ogled Margaret off towards the window on pretence of showing her some sight of interest in the square.

“Did they leave him in the lurch?” twittered a voice mockingly in my ear. It was my lady Ogilvie.

“It must be nice to be with a duke,” said I, very glum and miserable again all of a sudden.

“It's a great deal nicer to be with a man,” she answered. “Come and help me throw crumbs to the pretty wee birdies in the garden.”

In his attempt to 'smash 'em in detail' the Prince was acute enough to use the Colonel, and condescending enough to use me, as supporters. The unrivalled military skill which the Colonel would devote to the winning of London was dwelt upon until even the Colonel, in no wise inclined to under−estimate it, got restive, and snuffed and pshawed with great vigour. I, of course, was the early, strong−winged swallow that announced the flights of laggards behind.

There were some dozen chiefs of considerable position in the Prince's army, and he tackled them one by one, and tried to argue them into his way of thinking. Some he sent for to his lodging; others he visited in theirs —a special but wasted mark of distinction. On the whole they would not budge. They were courteous and respectful, for they were gentlemen, and he was their Prince, but their minds were made up and they would not surrender their wills to his. Mostly, in their talk, they simply chewed over again the morning's cud.

Mr. Secretary went off as envoy to fetch the chiefs to Exeter House, where the Prince received them in his little private chamber overlooking the gardens. He would stand, silent and moody, glowering out of the window, with the Colonel and me standing silent and thoughtful behind him. I felt keenly for him, for he was indeed a gracious, likeable young fellow, born to purple poverty and a shadowy princedom, and now, as he thought, with the reality of wealth and power snatched out of his grasp.

“If we go back,” said he, turning his eyes on me, so that I saw how life and light had quite gone out of them, “it's all over with my House.”

“I hope not, sir,” said I.

“I know it is,” he cried bitterly, almost rudely. “All over with us—and all over with me. If we go on, I shall at the worst go to my grave strong and sweet. If we go back—”

He paused and looked moodily out of the window. I think now, as I picture him to myself standing there, that he knew himself well enough to know what was coming. For another picture of him comes to my mind, as I saw him in Rome many years later, and shuddered as I saw him.

He turned and smiled at me, as one smiles who sips sour wine.

“If we go back, friend Wheatman, I shall just rot into it.”

He spoke truth. I saw him rotting.

And then, because he had more stuff in him than any other royal Stuart that ever lived, he turned round, proud and princely, as the door opened and in came Mr. Secretary with Macdonald of Glencoe, a short−horned bull of a man.

“And when was it,” said he, rapping the words out like hammer−strokes on an anvil, “that the Macdonalds got

feart?”

The Chief pulled up short, hit clean and hard between the eyes.

“Ye'll never see a feart Macdonald,” he said, “if ye live to be as auld as Ben Nevis.”

“Ye're in the wrong, Glencoe,” said Charles. “I saw one this morning, and he was frightened of the English.”

“I'll gie ye the lie o' that,” roared Glencoe, “if I hae to scrat my way into London wi' ma nails.”

“I'll be glad of the lie from you on those terms,” replied Charles calmly, “and you shall ride into London at my right hand while I take my words back.”

The Prince went to a table and filled a silver−gilt tass with brandy. He sipped it and then, handing it to the Chief, said, “We'll share the same glass to−day, Glencoe, as a pledge that we'll share the same victory to−morrow.”

I did not like his brandy−drinking, but he did it well this time. As I have said, he was at his best in dealing with a single man face to face. It is only the rarest and finest spirits that can dominate a crowd.

At a sign from the Prince the Colonel and I escorted the Chief to the door, bestowing on him, as was due and politic, every courtesy. He looked like a man who, after days of doubt, had newly found himself.

“We've got him!” cried Charles gleefully as the door closed behind him. “Now, gentlemen, I crave your attendance on a progress round the town. Mr. Wheatman, bear our compliments to my Lord Elcho, and bid him call out some score or so of our guards to escort us.”

We made a gallant show as we walked the streets of Derby in the early grey of that December evening. Ahead of us went a dozen dismounted life−guards to clear the causeways. Then followed Mr. Secretary with a brace or two of town notables unwillingly yoked to the task of giving an appearance of local support; then followed the Prince, between O'Sullivan and the Colonel, with young Clanranald and me at their heels; and another dozen life−guards in the rear. As we passed along the causeways, a score or so of mounted guards, with Lord Elcho at their head, kept level with us in the roadways. Volleys of slogans greeted us wherever we went, for the town was full to bursting of the clansmen. The townsmen crowded to doors and windows to watch us pass.

The Prince doffed to them every other yard, but he and all of us were mere curiosities to most of them.

The progress was stayed at the “White Horse” in Sadler−gate, and the Prince, with us, his immediate attendants, turned into the inn−yard, with its long uneven lines of stables and coach−houses, all packed with Camerons. At the news of the Prince's coming they trooped out, yelling lustily. Some sort of order was formed, and the Prince walked up and down among the swaying, uncouth masses, with a cheery smile on his face, and with now and again a phrase of their own Gaelic on his lips.

“The men are keen enough,” he said to the Colonel apart. “Let us go within and see what mood young Lochiel is in now.”

Lochiel, 'young' only by way of distinction from a Lochiel still older, wanted no digging out, for, the news having been carried to him, he ran out bareheaded and breathless. He was, in fact, a middle−aged gentleman, broody and melancholy at times, as these men of the mountains are apt to be when they've got brains. At the Council he had been silently set on going back.

“Your men are in fine fettle, Lochiel,” said Charles, “and as keen as their claymores to be at it.”

“They dinnae see the hoodie−craws gathering for the feast,” said Lochiel sombrely.

“They see the battle won and the spoils of victory, after the usual way with the Camerons,” replied the Prince.

“They havenae the gift of far−seeing,” said the Chief, gloomily proud of his own prophetic powers.

Charles started impatiently, and there would have been a wrangle but for the Colonel.

“Sir,” said he, addressing the Prince, “you will forgive an old campaigner for being a stickler for the rules and procedures of military operations. An inn−yard, with soldiery around and townsfolk gaping through doors and windows, is no place for a council of war. The gentleman is pleased to dream, of birds, as I gather. Let him back to the fireside and dream of them in peace.”

Without another word the Prince turned on his heel and strode out of the yard. I attended him at first, but missed the Colonel, and turned back to him, for Lochiel was all a Highlander, seer one minute and savage the next. Indeed, I found him, all his moodiness gone, as mad as a hatter.

“I'll hae the heart's blood o' ye for this, prince or no prince,” he bawled at the Colonel, who, precisely as I expected, was seizing the welcome opportunity of having a pinch of snuff.

“Good lad!” said he, holding out the box, as indifferent to the crowding Camerons as if they were sheep.

“Make it pigeons next time, Mr. Lochiel. Damme, Oliver, this rappee gets unendurable.”

His coolness took Lochiel off the boil, and he and I passed out without another word into Sadler−gate and hurried after the Prince. We found the progress somewhat ragged, and, as we were only a few yards from the corner of Rotten Row, which forms the side of the square opposite Exeter House, it was, I suppose, hardly worth while to trim it into shape again. In those few yards, however, an incident much more to my liking occurred, for just as we turned round the leading file of the rear of guards, we found that the Prince had again halted, in the light of a shop−window, and this time it was to talk to Margaret, who was standing there with Master Freake.

It was a large shop with two well−stocked bow−windows. The doorway between them, and half the inwards of the shop, were filled with the shop master, his apprentices, and customers, crowding and craning to get a sight of the Prince. Over the door was a shield−shaped sign, bearing the Derby ram for cognizance, and the legend, “Martin Moyle, Grocer and Italian Warehouseman.” I noted it then, because the word 'Italian' carried me back to Margaret's tirra−lirring, and I note it down now because, having looked at it, my eyes ranged over the heads of the gapers in the doorway to where Maclachlan, on the fringe of the group, was dodging about to find a place where he could see Margaret without being seen by the Prince.

Master Freake was talking with the Prince as composedly as if they had been friends of old standing. We had missed the beginning of their talk, but it was plain that Charles had expected a recruit and was disappointed.

“And why do you stand aside from us both?” he asked.

“Sir,” said the sedate merchant, “I am not interested in making kings.”

“What then?”

“Kingdoms, sir.”

“Kingdoms!” cried the Prince.

“Kingdoms!” reiterated Master Freake, with pride and emphasis. “But for me, and men like me, this country would be a waste not worth fighting for.”

The Prince looked with astonishment at the calm, solid man who made this strange announcement. After a minute's reflection, he said, “Mr. Freake, I would talk with you in private, if you will.”

“With pleasure, sir,” replied Master Freake.

“And, naturally, Mistress Waynflete will not be cruel,” continued the Prince, offering his arm.

Margaret took it, and the procession moved on again. Master Freake linked his arm in mine, and we walked on together.

“You've had adventures, I hear, since we parted, Oliver.”

“I fell into the claws of poetic justice,” I answered, “and, having failed as a real highwayman, nearly hanged as an imaginary one.”

He laughed. “Well, keep out of the sergeant's claws. He's only five miles off with a brace of his dragoons, but little Dot is watching him. The time to deal with him is not yet. Wait till his lordship of Brocton joins him. What do you think of the Prince?”

“I would not have believed a prince could be so likeable, sir.”

“I am, and shall remain, a mere observer,” he said, “a mere tracker−down of ten per cent on good security, but I don't mind admitting that, prince for prince, I prefer this young gentleman to the fat, snuffy, waddling, little drill−sergeant he's trying to displace.”

“You know the King, sir!”

“Well, and I know his weak spot, too, which is more important for our purposes. If His Gracious Majesty went to bed to−night with as many guineas in his pocket as that”—he jingled his loose coin vigorously —“he'd sleep in his breeches.”

On the way to Exeter House the Prince recovered his high spirits, and even kept us waiting in the hall while he continued some lightsome argument Margaret had led him into. At last he broke it off, laughing.

“Mr. Freake will think me an idle princeling for this, madam,” he said. “For your offence in thus hindering our matters of state we commit you to ward, and straightly charge our loyal subject, Master Wheatman, to hold you safe in keeping till after supper, when we will undertake to show you that our Highland reel can be as graceful as your Italian fandango.”

So, in great good humour, he went off with the Colonel and Master Freake.

“Your aide−de−camp's commission runs so far, I trust,” said Margaret demurely, “as to permit me to choose

my own cell."

"I think that might be allowed, madam," I replied, with answerable gravity, "but of course I must sit outside the door and keep strict watch over you."

"You would, I suppose, feel surer of me if you sat inside the door?"

"Naturally, madam."

"Then come along! I must know all that's knowable about that ghost. 'I never said any such thing,' quoth he! You're the cleverest man with your tongue I ever met, Oliver. And with what a pretty heat he said it! Just as, beyond a doubt, he did it with that pretty way he has."

If words were tones, and smiles, and eye−flashes, and lip−curlings, I could tell you not only what Margaret said but how she said it, and how, in saying it, she made mad sweet music ring within me.

We were out in the square again now, threading our way among people I hardly saw for being so wrapt up in her.

"Was she a pretty ghost?"

"Very," said I decidedly.

"How old was she?"

"Eighteen, or thereabouts."

"Eighteen! Oh, dear! I never dreamed it was as bad as that. I think kiss−giving and kissable ghosts over thirteen ought not to be allowed. Eighteen! It's a clear incitement to suicide!"

I was laughing at her whimsical sally when one particular item in the crowd demanded attention, for it obtrusively barred our way. It was Maclachlan, once again hot and red with haste, waving a small package he had in his hand.

"Ye left me, Mistress Margaret," he said. "I've been searching high and low for ye."

"And I'm glad you've found me, for I see you've got me the olives. You are indeed kind, Mr. Maclachlan."

"Ye left me!" he repeated passionately.

"That's true," she said lightly. "I forgot all about you till I saw a hand with an obvious bottle of olives dangling from it."

Now this was not Margaret, or at least it was another strange side of her. With me she had been almost absurdly grateful for such little services as I had rendered. I had got her eggs, as he had got her olives, but I and my eggs had not been received like this. I looked from one to the other curiously. She was cool and smiling, as befitted some small social occasion. He was just as clearly throbbing with passion. He, the Maclachlan, had been neglected, and neglected for me! I wondered why Margaret did not tell him that the Prince had commanded her company. That should have satisfied even him; but no, she left him in his error, and merely took the olives out of his hand, saying, "I hope they'll be fresh, though it's hardly to be expected in a little town in the middle of England."

Maclachlan had paid not the slightest attention to me and, while ready enough to deal with him, I paid none to him, and began to think him somewhat of an ass to be standing in the market−place of Derby airing his passions. Fortunately, perhaps, Lord George Murray, striding by towards Exeter House, caught sight of us and stopped abruptly.

"Ha' ye made a' right at the bridge yonder, Maclachlan?"

The young Chief's face supplied the answer.

"Ye havenae!" stormed Murray. "By gad, sir," lugging out his watch, "if you don't, in two hours from now, report all arrangements made, I'll hae ye shot by a squad of the Manchester ragabushes. Aff wi' ye, ye jawthering young fule!"

Maclachlan went off without so much as a bow to Margaret.

"Have you taken out your commission, sir?" said Murray to me, snapping the words out as though he would have them shear my head off.

"I have, my lord," I answered, forestalling the words with a correct military salute.

"Then what the blazes are you doing here?"

"My lord," I answered firmly, "by the direct commission of His Royal Highness, given to me personally, I am escorting this lady to jail."

"Then I'll forgive ye!" he retorted, and his strong face lost all its anger and found the wraith of a smile.

“Dinnae be too hard on the lassie! She's ane of the right sort.”

He returned my salute, bowed courteously to Margaret, and strode on

“Good lad!” said Margaret, happily mimicking her father. “You shall have some of the olives in a minute or two.”

“Olives seem to me precisely the right thing for us,” said I.

“And why, sir?”

It was very curious to me to see how, in her speech to me, she whipped about from the familiar “Oliver” to the stately “Sir.” There was always a reason for it, and I would have given much to know it.

“Your olives come from Italy, and I have been thinking of your Italian count.”

“So have I,” she said very soberly, and never said another word till we were safe and quiet in her day−room at the “Bald−Faced Stag.”

For over two hours I had Margaret to myself, and we were as happy and companionable as we had been in Dick Doley's cottage. And at this I marvelled. Our Kate was the only woman I had to judge by, and when our Kate got into her very best Sunday gown she got into her tantrums along with it, and poor Jack, what with awe of her finery and anxiety lest he should anger the minx, commonly had a thorny time of it. With Margaret it was just the opposite. When we got in, she excused herself and went off to her own room, coming back, after a weary time, in such a glory of silks and satins that I blinked my eyes before her dazzlements. What made it worse was that there was a comb—as she called it, though I should in my ignorance have thought it some rich and rare work in filigree belonging to an empress—which, owing to the smallness of her mirror and the poor light, she could not get to sit perfectly in its golden cushion, and I was bidden to put it where and as it ought to be. I was a long time over the task, in part because I was really clumsy, but mainly because I was in no hurry. I got it right at last, and even ventured, very craftily and lightly, to kiss it as it lay there.

“It's quite right now,” said I.

“At last! I'm afraid it's been a trouble to you. Now, Oliver, open the bottle of olives, and, while we eat them, tell me all about the ghost.”

Many a time in the hard days that came to me later, I refreshed my soul by thinking those happy hours over again. They are part of me, but no part of my story, and I make no record of them here. We had long talks, with long silences between them, as can only happen with very real friends who are company for one another without a clatter of words.

At last this golden time came to an end, for in walked the Colonel and Master Freake to supper.

“I am thankful,” said the Colonel to Margaret. “Murray told me you'd been taken to jail.”

“You heard the news with great content, I suppose,” said Margaret.

“I did, because—” He stopped to frown into the snuff−box.

“Because of what? Pray observe, gentlemen, what an affectionate father I have!”

“Because he also told me the name of your jailer!”

“You don't deserve to have a daughter,” declared Margaret, with such a pretence of vehemence that her cheeks, between and beneath her coils of yellow hair, blazed like two poppies in a wheat−shook.

“I've made up for it by deserving something even better, and that's a good supper. Pull the bell, Oliver!”

* * * * *

Arrived in the great chamber at Exeter House, we found Charles making his last stand. Feeling ran riot; there was little regard for the regentship of the Prince; true to itself to the end, the Stuart cause was dying in a babel of broken counsels.

The ladies of the party were collected, uncertain and disquieted, on the hearth, where Margaret joined them, while the Colonel and I made our way and stood behind the Prince.

“His Grace of Perth desires to go on,” said Charles. “So does Glencoe. So do my faithful Irish friends. Your men, as you well know, expect to go on. To get them to go back, you must start in the dead of night and lie to them, telling them they are going on. Only you, their chiefs and fathers, want to go back.”

“To hell with the Irish!” cried one from the background. “They're no' worth the dad of a bonnet.”

“It's no matter to them,” said another man by him. “They've neither haid nor maid to lose.”

This fetched O'Sullivan to his feet in a tearing rage. “We've got lives to lose,” he cried, “and, by G—, we're not afraid to lose 'em!”

At this the yelling must have been heard in the square, and the gesticulating and grimacing would have been amusing on a less serious occasion. At last, in a lull in the gale, the Colonel, addressing the Prince, curtly demanded, “Who is the chief military commander of your army, sir?”

“My Lord George Murray,” answered Charles bitterly.

“Then it's time your commander commanded. This spells disaster whether we go on or go back.”

“It's the plain truth you're telling, Colonel Waynflete,” said Lord Ogilvie loudly. In an undertone I heard him say, “Oot wi' it, Geordie!”

When Murray arose, everybody knew the finishing touch was to be put to the business, and a strained silence fell on the assembly.

“I have advised ye to go back, sir,” he said, “because, in the complete absence of the support we were led to expect, it is foolish to go on. Your Royal Highness wants to go on, and there's not a man here who does not honour you for your courage. Now, sir, I will go on, and so shall every man here I can command or influence, if those who hae tell't ye behind my back that they think we ought to go on will put their opinion down in writing and subscribe their names to it, here and now. One condition more, sir. That writing, so subscribed, shall be sent by a sure hand direct from this town to His Majesty in Rome, so that he may judge each man justly.”

“I agree,” said Charles eagerly. “Pen and paper, Mr. Secretary!”

It at once became clear, however, that Murray had taken the measure of the men he had to deal with.

“Why make flesh of one and fish of another?” asked O'Sullivan, and old Sir Thomas nodded approval of the question.

“The decision should be the decision of the Council,” said the Duke of Perth.

“Will ye write your names to it, or will ye not?” demanded Murray.

No one spoke.

“That settles it, sir,” said Murray. “But I desire you, Mr. Secretary, to make a note of my offer and its reception.”

“Have your way!” said Charles, in sullen anger. “But it settles another thing for ye. I call no more councils.”

He turned and strode out of the room. The Stuart cause was in its coffin, and it only remained for us to give it a fair burial.

When the door closed behind the Prince, the Colonel whispered in my ear, “Slip off and tell Freake!”

I did the journey at a run, and found Master Freake sitting, quietly meditative, but booted and spurred for his journey.

“Well, Oliver?”

“We go back to−night.”

In five minutes I was standing in the Ironmarket at his grey mare's head.

“I'm not deserting you, lad,” said he, gripping my hand heartily.

“Of course not, sir. Good−bye, and good luck!”

“My love to Margaret. Look out for the sergeant. Good−bye!”

CHAPTER XXII. A BROTHER OF THE LAMP

Two days afterwards, towards six o'clock on a bitter evening, I rode wearily into Leek. I was having a hard apprenticeship in soldiering under a master who had no idea of sparing either me or himself. For the Colonel had accepted the post of second, under Murray, in command of our rear−guard, and had made it a condition of acceptance that I should be with him. Some thirty Highlanders, mostly Macdonalds, picked dare−devils, had been mounted and turned into dragooners, and I, thanks to the Colonel, had been made Captain over them.

“The lad's no experience, but he's got sense,” he said to my lord George Murray.

“I ken him weel aneugh,” said his lordship. “He threatened to knock my head off. D'ye ca' that sense, Kit Waynflete?”

“Since your head's still on your shoulders,” said the Colonel, fumbling for his snuff, “I do. He knocked Maclachlan's Donald into a log of timber, and, damme, I hardly saw his hand move.”

“That's only a trick, sir,” I protested.

“Weel, Captain Wheatman,” said Murray, “keep your ugly English tricks to y'rsel. Mind ye, colonel or no colonel, I'll break ye first chance ye gie me.”

Maclachan was, I must say, very obliging and complimentary over my promotion. He gave me Donald to be my sergeant and personal servant, finding him, how I knew not, a horse strong enough to carry him easily.

“It is ferra guid,” said Donald to his chief. “Er shall pe lookit to as if her were ma mither's own son.”

To me, Captain Wheatman, clinking about in the corridor waiting for the Colonel, comes William, suave and confidential as ever.

“Well, William,” said I. “Any more coincidences?”

“Yes, sir,” said he, and began his hand−washing.

“You'll die a rich man, William.”

“No, sir. This particular coincidence made me the poorer by, I should say,” suspending his washing to calculate, “some five shillings.”

“The devil it did! How was that?”

“Your honour's clothes that you left behind, sir, when you were transmuted, as my lord would say, were stolen.”

“And you value them at five shillings! I ought to crack your head for you.”

“Yes, sir. Cast−offs sells very cheap, sir. But the coincidence, sir! I've not really come to that yet.”

“Go on, William! You interest me deeply.”

“I found them, sir, at the bottom of the garden, torn to rags, sir!”

“And sold 'em for fivepence! Eh, thrifty William?”

“Sixpence, to be exact, sir!”

The Colonel rushed me off, but I found time to give the rascal a crown, which put him sixpence in pocket. A servant ought to have his vails, and, besides, William's concern amused me a good crown's worth.

This was late on in the night after the final decision to go back, and since then I had been scouting miles behind the main body of our rear−guard, so as to make sure that the Duke's horse were not on our track. I had slept by driblets as opportunity offered. Now, my purpose accomplished, I was looking forward to supper and bed, having left a patrol of fresh men some six miles back to watch the southern road.

There was one thing in my mind, however, that must be attended to first. I must see Mistress Hardy of Hardiwick. My heart ached for her, for I knew how sorely she would feel the retreat of the Prince. Moreover, the clansmen were not likely to discriminate between her and other townsfolk, and I would save her from disturbance. So, jumping off the sorrel, and giving him in charge to one of my men, I started for the little cottage. I was turning the corner out of the square when some one, running lightly behind me, placed a hand on my arm and detained me. It was Margaret.

“You've no need to trouble, Oliver,” she said. “I've kept a room for you at the 'Angel.'“

“Thank you,” I replied. “You are very kind, madam.”

“Poof! Come along! You're so tired that you can hardly keep your eyes open to look at me. Come along, sir!”

She was merrily pulling at my arm as she spoke. “I don't want to be obliged to return you every service, you know, sir!”

“No, madam! Certainly not.”

“No, indeed, sir! I'm not going to put you to bed, except as the very last resource.”

“Fortunately, madam, I'm a long way from needing that. In a few minutes I shall gladly take advantage of your care for me. First, however, I must see to our old friend to whom the Prince gave the brooch.”

“We'll go together!” said Margaret, putting her arm in mine.

The cottage was dark and silent, welcome proof that she was undisturbed. I knocked gently, and, after a short delay, the door opened, and her woman appeared, candle in hand.

“I knew you'd come, sir,” she said simply. “And this is your lady! Come in!”

Candle in hand, she paced ahead of us to the door of the room, and then stood aside, erect and solemn, to let us pass in. I looked at her closely. The worried, anxious look on her comely face had gone, and she was subdued, calm, and happy.

“Thank God!” she whispered. “She's at peace!”

I stepped ahead of Margaret into the fine old room, with its pleasant memorials of ancientry. There they were, just as I had seen them —scutcheon, portrait, glove, and pounce−box. There was no change in them; they were the abiding elements on which a strong soul had kept itself strong. But change there was. At the *prie−Dieu*, kneeling in a rapture before the Virgin Mother, was a solemn, black−robed priest. A narrow white bed was in the room. Two large candles burned steadily at its head, two at the foot; and on the bed, the linen turned down to reveal the thin, frail hands crossed below the Prince's brooch, lay the still, white form of our lady of the square. God had taken her to Himself. Death had caught her with a welcoming smile on her face, and, in pity and ruth, had left it there.

The Hardys of Hardiwick had given their last gift to the cause.

Tears were streaming down Margaret's cheeks. With shaking hands she removed her hat and, kneeling down at the bedside, clasped her hands in prayer.

“She talked no end about you, sir,” whispered the serving−woman, “and about the beautiful lady with you. That standing in the cold square to see the Prince was the death of her. She would have her bed put down here, sir. She wanted to die here, with the old shield in her eyes, for she was proud of her blood, as well she might be.”

“Yes,” I whispered back. “She was the last of a great race.”

“Aye, sir. She was that. She was a bit moithered in her mind, dear heart, just afore she went. The last words she said were a prayer for his soul, —her sweetheart you know, sir, that she lost sixty years ago,—just as I'd heard her pray thousands of times. But, poor thing, she got his name wrong. She called him 'John.'“

Choking, I threw myself on my knees beside Margaret, and prayed and fought, and fought and prayed again. Here, before me, I saw Death in the only shape in which it can give no sorrow—sinless age that had gently glided into immortality; and, with equal vision, I saw the black passage ... and the still twisted thing lying there in a patch of gloom ... my friend, gone in the pride of his youth ... his life spilt out in anger and agony ... and by me. Then the innocent hand of her for whom, though all unwittingly, I had done this thing, crept on to my shoulder, and I turned to look at her.

“Thank God we came, Oliver!” she whispered.

Before we could rise, the black−robed priest lifted his tall, gaunt frame slowly from the *prie−Dieu*. Standing on the opposite side of the bed he raised his hands in blessing.

“Our sister is with God,” he said, his deep voice vibrant with emotion. “My children, you are, as I think, those who were much in her prayers at the last. I know not who you are, but, in her memory and in God's name, I give you in this life His Peace, and in the life to come the assurance of His Everlasting Blessedness. Amen.”

He ceased. Gravely, and in a solemn silence, he knelt again at the *prie−Dieu*. We rose. First Margaret, and then I, kissed the Prince's brooch and the folded hands, and then stole out of the room. We were too awe−stricken to speak, or even to look at each other, but, as we went, she placed her hand in mine.

Weary days, full of hard riding and scouting, passed before I saw Margaret again. I was always in the rear, generally far in the rear, while she and the other ladies were, very properly, kept well ahead. She now rode in the calash with Lady Ogilvie,—the two being inseparable,—and Maclachlan was with them. My work was hard and anxious but it kept me from thinking overmuch. I put all my soul into it so that it should.

“The lad does very well, as I told you he would,” said the Colonel to Murray one night when I rode in to make my report.

“I see no signs of my chance of breaking him,” said his lordship grimly, but he would have me sup with him that night, and was very unbending and helpful.

There is nothing I need say about this stage of the retreat. It was well managed, and is, I am told, a very creditable piece of soldiership. It does not belong to my story but to history, to which I leave it.

Things did happen, however, that do concern me. The first was laughable though vexatious. This was the manner of it.

While the Prince was making the stage from Macclesfield to Manchester, and Murray and the Colonel were in force a few miles in his rear, I had to keep the country behind them well observed. I had one patrol within sight of Macclesfield, and others stretching out along an edge of upland country running westward to the next main road. I spent the night in a little wayside ale−house, and was having my breakfast next morning when I was disturbed by a succession of yells from without.

I ran into the yard and there was Donald, the rough head of one of my dragoons in each hand, banging them together, varying his bangs with kicks at any accessible spot, and shrieking at them in Gaelic, while they shrieked back and wriggled to escape. He stopped when he saw me, but still held them by the pow.

“What's it all about, Donald?” I asked.

“The loons! It's Glencoe 'erself sail hang 'em,” he said breathlessly.

“What for? Out with it, Donald!”

“Yes, you gomeril”—shoving one of the men sprawling into the stable —“oot wi' it! Bring your tarn rogues wark 'ere!”

The man came sheepishly out with my saddle, cut and ripped and gutted till it wasn't worth a sou.

Strict and stern inquiry threw little light on the matter. I had my own suspicions, namely, of two licorous raffatags in the so−called Manchester regiment, whom I had handsomely kicked out of a roadside cottage where they were for behaving after their kind. They had been seen prowling about the curtilage of the ale−house the night before.

I went back to my breakfast. For a few hours I had to make shift with the saddle of one of my dragoons, but, after a short halt later on, Donald brought out the sorrel with a fine, and nearly new, saddle.

“Tat's petter,” said he. “'Er sail ride foine now.”

“This cost you a twa−three bawbees, I'll be bound,” I remarked.

Donald grinned intelligently and I made no closer inquiry. The good fellow made me uncomfortable, for he would have slit the throat of the greatest squire along the road to get me a shoe−lace.

Early next morning his lordship sent me ahead into Manchester with a dispatch for the Prince, who had spent the night there. It was a welcome task, for it would, I hoped, give me at least a sight of Margaret. Instead of this sweet meat, however, I got sour sauce.

When I got there our army was beginning its onward march, and there were thousands of people about to watch the clansmen fall in, and little disguise they made of their feelings. As it happened, when I rode into the square, Ogilvie's large regiment was lining up, and he left it in charge of his major to come and talk to me.

“I'm wishing you'd come half an hour ago,” he began. “Ishbel would ha' given much to see you, and so wad some one else, I'm thinking.”

“Have the ladies started already?” I asked, with painful carelessness.

“Losh, man, Maclachlan has 'em up and away the morn in fine style. He's getting a very attentive chiel is Maclachlan, and I wonder ma Ishbel disna like him better than she does. There's too damn few of us to be spitting and sparring among ourselves.”

“This is so, my lord,” I said.

“I'm just plain Davie to ma friends,” he said simply. “I'm no exactly a man after God's ain heart, like my Bible namesake, but I hae no speeritual pride where a guid man's concernit, and it ill becomes men who are in the same boat, and that only a cockle−shell thing, to be swapping off court terms wi' ane anither. They're aff, an' we mun step it out. An' I'm no really a lord.”

“I want the Prince's lodging, Davie,” I explained, as we walked on the causeway level with the head of his column.

“We march past it, an' I'll drop ye there. The young man takes it verra ill. The heart's clean melted oot of him. An' sma' wonder! See the sour, mum bodies in this town! When we came down there were bonfires an' bell−ringings, an' cheerings, an' mostly every windie wi' a lit candle, maybe twa−three, in it. The leddies, an' they're nae bad−lookin' lassies either, had bunches o' plaid ribbons in their bosoms an'—this I hae from Maclachlan—plaid gairters to their stockings.”

In such talk we spent the way to the Prince's lodging, where I charged him to carry my greetings to the ladies. He wrung my hand in parting and, his major having halted the regiment, stepped proudly to the head of his men. I stood on the edge of the causeway, drew my sword, and stood at the salute, according to the courtesy of the wars. He returned the honour in like soldierly fashion, rapped out a command, and so passed on into the hungry North. It was the last I was to see of Davie, commonly called the Lord Ogilvie.

To my astonishment the Prince was not yet risen, and it was some time before he came to me in his day−room, where I was awaiting him. I rose and bowed as he entered, and gave him the dispatch.

“Curse your foul English weather, Captain Wheatman. It's getting into my bones.”

This was, I fancy, only his way of excusing to me the nip of brandy he was pouring out.

“That's better!” he said, putting down the empty glass. “I have something to thank France for after all.” He laughed at his own poor joke, but there was no ring of merriment in his laughter, and added, “Now for what my runaway general has to say.”

He read the letter impatiently and sneeringly. “I suppose Mr. Secretary must write something back,” was his comment. “It doesn't matter much what, since we're running away as fast as our legs can carry us. Any fool, or rogue, or Murray can run away.”

He paced up and down the room with long angry strides, muttering words I did not understand. Suddenly he stopped, and turned on me with the smiling, princely face of the greater Charles I knew and liked.

“Curse me for an ingrate! I am heartily obliged to you, Captain Wheatman, for your pains. My lord speaks of you in high terms of praise. And I must not keep you. Murray must have his answer. Come with me, and Mr. Secretary shall take it down while I have my breakfast.”

I followed him out and along a passage with doors on either side, outside one of which stood a servant or sentry, who had eyed me furtively on my coming inward. When he saw the Prince, he opened the door and thrust in his head, to announce our visit. He was clumsy, too, and, keeping his head round the edge of the door too long, bumped into the Prince, who rapped out an oath and flung him aside. As I followed Charles in, I caught a glimpse of the back of a man in a heavy mulberry wrap−rascal, guarded with tarnished silver braid at the cuffs and pockets, who was hastily leaving the Secretary's room by an inner door.

“Ha!” said Charles sneeringly. “More plots and politics! If I could be schemed into a crown, you'd be the man to do it.”

“I must be acquent wi' what gaes on in the toun, your Royal Highness, an' ma man yonder's a rare ferret, but I didna think him worthy to be in the presence, sae I just bundled him oot.”

“All your plotting and contrivings will not do you as much good as a glass of brandy. The climate's getting at you.”

Indeed Mr. Secretary was all of a shake, and looked in a scared manner from the Prince to me and back again.

“It's naething but a little queasiness, such as we elder, bookish men are apt to get by ower−much application. Your Royal Highness is gracious to note my little ailments,” said he smoothly. He had recovered already.

“Try brandy!” said Charles. “It settles the stomach fine. Well, come and take down a reply to this while I have some breakfast!”

The queasiness seemed to return, for Mr. Secretary was slow, captious, and argumentative, though the matter of the dispatch was only as to where the army should halt for a day's rest. At last Preston was decided on, and the dispatch written accordingly. I bowed myself out, jumped on the sorrel, and started for the Stockport road.

Our rear was closer up than usual this morning. Manchester, being a considerable town, was not to be cleared of our main of troops until the first column of the rear was in the southern skirts of the town. Outside the Prince's lodging, his escort of life−guards was now drawn up. As I rode along the edge of the market−square the Camerons were massing, and the streets adjacent were seething with clansmen.

I put the sorrel to it and was soon out in the low open country. After cantering a mile or so, I caught sight of two horsemen, well ahead of me, riding south at a round gallop. One of them wore a big mulberry wrap−rascal. It

is no uncommon garment to see along a turnpike on a biting December day, but, ten minutes later, after they dropped to a walk to ease their horses up a slope, I saw the silver guarding round the pockets.

If this were the man I had seen hurrying out of Mr. Secretary's room, a look at him would be worth while, so I spurred after them. The clatter I made had the desired effect. At the top of the slope, wrap−rascal turned round. It was Weir, the Government spy. He squealed to his companion, who looked back in turn. My heart leaped fiercely at the sight of his seamed leathery face and dab−of−putty nose. It was the sergeant of dragoons.

Down the slope they raced, with me after them full tilt, proud as a peacock to be driving two men headlong before me, and one of them an old campaigner. It was my undoing. The road was lined with straggling hedges, and a long pistol shot ahead, a cross−track cut it. The sergeant was giving orders to the spy as they rode, and at the crossway the sergeant, shouting, “Shoot low!” turned sharp to the left while the spy made for the right.

It was a pretty trick, for it put me between two fires. I was on the spy's pistol hand as he turned, and he let fly at me, not out of calculated bravery, as his face plainly showed, but in a flurry of despair. The motive behind a shot, however, does not matter. It's the bullet that counts, and his got me just above the left elbow. I was up in my stirrups, aiming at the sergeant, who was pulling his horse round to be at me. I saw splinters fly from a bough to his right.

I had not looked to the spy. Now a shot rang out down the lane on his side. It was followed by a piercing shriek, and this by another shot. In between the shots, the serjeant wheeled round, and raced off down the lane for dear life, spurring and flogging like a maniac. It was useless to follow. My rein hand had lost its grip, my arm felt aflame, and blood was already dripping fast from my helpless fingers.

Looking down the lane, I saw Weir lying in the road, and a strange horseman climbing down from his saddle. I rode up to him.

“How d'ye do?” he said affably. “Sorry I could not get the other chap for you, but I meant having Turnditch. The dirty rascal has sent his last lad to the gallows. Faugh! I could spit on his carrion.”

A glance to the road showed that he was right. The spy's blank, yellow face was turned upwards; his eyes, with the horror of hell still in them, stared wide−open at the sky. Just above his right eyebrow there was a hole I could have put my finger in.

“Damn my silly eyes!” cried the stranger. “You're winged, sir, and badly. It must be seen to at once.”

He helped me down, took off my coat and waistcoat, and turned up my shirt−sleeve, doing all this deftly and almost womanly.

“Hurrah! Missed the bone and gone clear through! Put you right in no time! Plug down your finger there, sir, while I cut a stick. That's excellent. You won't mind if I keep you while I reload my barkers? The safe side, you know!”

With his handkerchief and my own, and a length of hazel for a tourniquet, he bound up the wound, and with much skill, for he at once reduced the flow of blood to a mere trickle. While he was busy over me, I took stock of him.

He was a man of about my own age and height, but slimmer and wirier. His features were rather irregular, but an intelligent, humorous look atoned for this defect, and his bright grey eyes were the quickest I have ever seen. Though an utter stranger, there was a puzzling familiarity about him, and I tried hard to recall which of my acquaintance featured him. His horse, now cropping at the roadside, was a splendid brown blood mare, the best horse, barring Sultan, I had seen for many a day. The last thing I noted was that the man was singularly well dressed.

“That's patched you up till you can get to a regular doctor. There's a first−class man at Stockport, opposite the west door of the church, Bamford by name. You can't miss his place, and he'll pocket his fee like a wise man ind ask no questions.”

“You've done very well, sir,” said I. “The blood has almost ceased to flow. I'm greatly beholden to you.”

“Say no more!” he cried earnestly. “It's a boon you've conferred on me, if you only knew it. *Nemo repente turpissimus*, as we say.”

“*Video proboque*, as we also say,” I countered, smiling.

“Oddones! A brother of the lamp!” he cried, laughing shortly, and suddenly sobering. “I must be on. Sorry to leave you, sir, but I think you're all right. Take care, however. I was touched myself t'other day, and the damned hole in my ribs still bleeds if I exert myself too much.”

“You should surely be in bed, if there's a hole in your ribs.”

“In bed!” he sniffed. “I took to bed, egad, and nearly got pinched. Now I've no need for exertion. In this gap between the Highlanders, I'm as snug as a flea in a blanket.”

After helping me into my clothes and on to my horse, he strolled up to the dead man.

“Well, Turnditch,” he said, “you know everything now, or nothing.” Then, dropping lightly on his knee, he turned gaily to me, and said, “Always plunder the Egyptian, dead or alive.”

He rifled the spy's pockets with the easy indifference of an expert, singing as he turned them out:

“The priest calls the lawyer a cheat;
The lawyer beknaves the divine;
And the statesman because he's so great,
Thinks his trade is as honest as mine.”

He stopped his singing and, tossing a well−stuffed leather bag up and down in his hand, said, “There's really no objection to virtue when the jade is not her own reward. Chunk! chunk! There's alchemy for you! Half an ounce of lead into half a pound of gold!”

He stowed the bag in his pocket, jumped on his mare, and together we walked our horses to the turnpike, where we halted side by side, our horses' heads to their respective destinations.

“Sir,” said I, holding out my hand, “I am greatly in your debt. My name is Oliver Wheatman, of the Hanyards, Staffordshire. May I have the pleasure of learning yours?”

He took my hand, looked at me intently, with his grey eyes very thoughtful and steady, and then said quietly, “Samuel Nixon, Bachelor of Arts, sometime Demy of Magdalen College, Oxford.”

“Commonly called 'Swift Nicks,'“ I added, smiling.

“Right first time,” he cried gleefully, and shot off like an arrow towards Manchester.

So Nance Lousely had not got her pinnerfull of guineas after all.

CHAPTER XXIII. DONALD

I got my wound in the early forenoon of December the 10th. About eight o'clock on the night of the 17th I sat down in a deserted shepherd's hut to the meal Donald had got ready for me. The week had been in one respect a blank, for I had not seen Margaret. In every other respect it had been laborious, strenuous, and exciting, and we had just seen the end of the toughest job so far. We, meaning my dragoons and myself, were on the top of Shap. Some ammunition wagons had broken down on the upward climb, bunging up the road at its stiffest bit and delaying us for hours. His lordship and the Colonel, with the infantry of the rear−guard, were in Shap village a mile or two ahead. The Prince was still farther on, probably in Penrith.

The delay was dangerous. Our army had rested one full day at Preston and another at Lancaster. Even at Preston the Colonel and I, with my dragoons, had barely ridden out of the town when a strong body of enemy horse rode in from the east, sent by Wade to reinforce the Duke. Our margin of safety was being cut down daily. We should have to fight before long, and I was posted here, on the top of Shap, to see that no surprise was sprung upon us.

The shieling, as Donald called it, was about a hundred yards past the highest point of the road, where a picket was on the watch. Across the road was a bit of a dip, and here my dragoons were making themselves comfortable round a roaring fire, fuel for which was provided by the smashed−up carcass of a derelict wagon. The country was as bare as a bird's tail, but by a slice of great good luck one of them had shot a stray sheep on the way up, and the air was thick with the smell of singed mutton.

Here I must say of my dragoons that they were men I loved to command. After twelve days' work of a sort to knock up an elephant they were as fresh as daisies. Donald they all feared, and as Donald, for my behoof, made no bones about telling them how the laddie's nief, sma' as it lookit, 'ad dinged 'im, Donald, oot o' his seven senses, they feared me. I think they even liked me. Anyhow, I never had an ugly look or a glum word from one of them. Some people express surprise at the splendid Highland regiments now, thanks to Mr. Pitt's politic genius, serving in our army. It is no surprise to me who have commanded a body of clansmen for a fortnight in the back−end of a retreat.

Donald was a very jewel of a man. He was servant, sergeant, nurse, and companion, and unbeatable in all capacities. My wound had given me more trouble than I expected, even though Mr. Bamford had told me that one of the larger arteries was injured. Once or twice since, as occasion served, a doctor had dressed it, but it was Donald's incessant care that did most for it. I still wore my left arm in a sling.

He had made me a fire of wood and turfs; given me roast mutton, a slice of cheese sprinkled with oatmeal, and good bread to eat, and a pint of milk laced with whisky to drink. Refinements which he would have scouted for himself in any place, he had taken thought to provide for me in these wilds—a pewter plate and a silver beaker, both stolen. The only furnishing in the hut was a squat log, almost the size of a butcher's block, which served as a table. For seat, Donald rigged up half the tail−board of the wagon across two heaps of turfs. He completed his work by producing a tallow candle stuck in a dab of clay by way of candlestick.

Donald had left me to my food and gone over to the camp to get his own. I made a nourishable meal and then sat down before the fire to smoke and think.

I had not seen Margaret since Leek, and had not been alone with her since, her hand in mine, we had crept out of the gracious presence of the dead. And I had got into a mood in which I felt that it was well I did not see her. Some day I should have to do without her altogether, and this was a chance of learning how to do it.

Though I had not seen her, I had heard of her. While our army stayed the day in Lancaster I had been watching the road within sight of the spires of Preston, wondering why the Duke's horse, after their accession of strength, did not come after us. The Marquess of Tiverton has since told me that the Duke had been kept a day at Preston by rumours of a French landing on the south coast. Being far behind, I had ridden through Lancaster without drawing rein, but in the main street a stranger—one of us, however, as his white cockade showed—had stepped up to my saddle and handed me a letter. It was plainly of a woman's writing, and I burned to think that it was Margaret's hand that had penned the direction to “Oliver Wheatman, Esquire, Captain of Dragoons in the army of His Royal Highness the Prince Regent.” I tore it open, and found it was from the Lady Ogilvie. She

would understand and forgive if she could ever know how disappointed I was.

It had been written that morning before leaving the town, and bore traces of hasty composition. It ran as follows:—

"SIR,—This is to let ye know, dear Oliver, that I'm sure M. has got a bee in his bonnet. I'm thinking that some one we know has tell't him she will hae no trokings with him in the way he wants. I dinna ken for certain, mark ye, but they were taegither last night, and this morning he's not hanging round to pit us in ye carriage, as he ordinarily does, and she is pale and quiet, and says she wishes her father was at hand, and I like it not, dear Oliver. I call you dear Oliver because y'are such a guid laddie, just as I'm a guid girl. Davie tell't me how you stood up and saluted him, and I was glad I'd kissed ye ance upon a time, though it was only to plague ye. Remember what I tell't ye about these Highland boddys. M. is like all the rest of 'em, and moreover the Prince made ye his aide−de−camp, and it was to have been him, tho' he didna mind at the first because it left him free to be courting his leddy, but noo he'll hae it rankling in his heart like poison. And keep your eye on that chiel, Donald. He's foster−brother to M., and wad stick his dirk in the Prince himself if M. tell't him to. They're not bad boddys, but that's how they are. She says naething about ye, and that's a guid sign, I'm thinking. I wish ye knew the French instead of that silly Lattin, for then I cud write ye a propper letter wi' nice words in it, but she says yell hae to learn Italian first to suit her, but that's only her daffery. Excuse this ill−writ note, for the paper is bad and I'm no sure o' my English when it's guid.—Your obedient servant and loving guid friend,

"ISHBEL OGILVIE"

I pulled the dab of mud close to my elbow and read it again. In part it was plain enough. That Maclachlan was madly in love with Margaret had become almost a matter of common gossip. My Lord George Murray had hinted at it more than once, as he had at my displacing the young Chief in the Prince's favour. Maclachlan was son and heir to a chief of considerable power and reputation. That he should fall in love with Margaret was natural, and had she fallen in love with him I should not have been surprised. Even after the event, I still say that he was a fine, upstanding man, delightful to look on, and, so far as I knew, worthy of any woman, even of such a one as Margaret. But the heart is master not servant, and cannot be commanded. She loved him not and there was an end of it.

Next, Lady Ogilvie hinted at danger to me from him. Well, if he wanted a fight, a fight he should have. There's no Englishman living thinks more of Scotsmen than I do, but I have never thought enough of the best Scot breathing to run away from him. As for Donald, unless I was an idiot and he a better actor than Mr. Garrick, he would far sooner have driven his dirk into himself than into me. That matter could rest. There would be no fighting that night, and I never put on my breeches till it's time to get up.

Where her ladyship was wrong was in supposing, as clearly she did, that Margaret's love affairs interested me otherwise than as being Margaret's. I loved her, loved her dearly, all the more dearly because hopelessly. I had no qualifications which would enable me to speak my love. At my best nothing but a poor yeoman, I was now not even that, I was a declared rebel in a rebellion that had failed. And if I had had every qualification that rank and wealth could give me, it would still have been the same. Between her and me was the dead body of my friend and the widowed heart of my sister.

I was meditatively refilling my pipe when I heard Donald's voice without, raised in earnest explanation.

"An' if I didna think it wass auld Nick comin' for me afore ma reetfu' time, may I never drink anither drap whisky as lang as I live."

Some one laughed at the explanation, and Donald, still explaining, pushed open the door and made way for Margaret, who, before I could rise, was glowering over me, in the delightful way she had, girlish pretence just dashed with womanly earnest.

"I shall never forgive you, nor father, nor Donald, nor anybody else. And you're not to move, sir!"

"I'm sorry, madam," said I.

"You always are. It's your favourite mood. You live on sorrow," she said, pelting me with the terse, sharp sentences. Then, for I twitched at her telling me I lived on sorrow, she melted at once, and said, "Oh, Oliver, I'm so sorry. Why did you not send for me and let me nurse it better? Surely that was my right as well as my duty."

There was no contenting her till she had seen and dressed my wound. She had brought lint and linen with her, some kind of balsam which nearly made me glad she had not had the daily dressing of my arm, and even a basin and a huge bottle of clear spring water, which were brought in from the calash by Bimbo, Lady Ogilvie's little

black coachman. The hut looked like a surgery, and Donald and Bimbo got mixed up in the most laughable way in dodging about to wait on her.

"Com' oot of it!" said Donald desperately, unwinding the little black out of his plaid for the second time.

"You one big elephant in pekkaloats!" he retorted, grinning bare his big white teeth. "You tread on Bimbo, Bimbo go squash."

"How does it feel now?" asked Margaret, when her task was over.

"I shall be able to clout Donald with it in the morning," I answered.

"Tat's petter," said he, grinning with delight. "I'm thinkin' I'd suner be dinged wi' 'er again than see 'er hinging there daein' naethin'."

He took Bimbo off to the camp−fire and left us alone. We wrangled about the seating accommodation of the hut, for the cart−tail was but short, and I wanted her to have it to herself. She flouted the idea, and in the end we shared it, and I minded its shortness no longer. She would fill my pipe for me, and held a burning splinter to the bowl while I got it going. Over her doctoring she had been very pale and quiet. Now she got her colour back in the light and warmth of the fire, but she quietened down again as soon as I was smoking in comfort.

She told me briefly that she had stayed in Shap to see her father. Lady Ogilvie had insisted on her keeping the calash, so that she could come on in comfort in the morning. From her father she had learned of my wound, and had come on at once to see for herself how I was. She would start back for Shap shortly, where she was to stay the night with her father.

She told me this and then leaned forward, cupping her chin in her hands, and went quiet again.

I was glad of her silence, glad that she was hiding her face from me, for I needed to pull myself together. That something had happened was clear, and, whatever it was, it had struck home. In some way of deep concernment there was a new Margaret by my side, but in another way it was the old familiar Margaret as well, for she was wearing mother's long grey domino. She had unclasped it so that it now hung loosely on her, and flung back the hood so that the firelight made lambent flickerings in her hair.

"I have not seen you for twelve days," she said at last.

"No, madam."

"Have you been neglecting me, sir?" Just a touch of vigour was in her voice, but she still gazed at the fire.

"You are a soldier's daughter, not an alderman's," I said quietly, and the retort brought her head round with a jerk.

"And how does that excuse your neglect?"

"By giving you the chance of ascertaining from your father whether my military duties have left me any opportunity of neglecting you," I answered steadily. As usual with me, since I could not woo, I would be master where I could. It was a source of mean delight to me.

"More logic," she said briefly, and turned to the fire again.

Apparently she tested the logic in her mind and came to the conclusion that it was sound. She got up, threw some wood on the fire, thrusting me back playfully when I tried to forestall her, and then said merrily, "What do you think dad said to−night?"

"It would take hours to guess, I expect, so tell me at once, since I see it hipped you."

"It did," she said, with playful emphasis. "I fear I've not trained him up as fathers should be trained, for he coolly told me that if I had not had the misfortune to be a girl, I might perhaps have turned out as good a lad as you."

"Misfortune!" I echoed almost angrily.

"The exact word," she replied.

"Misfortune! To be the most beautiful woman in England, with the world at your feet—he calls that a misfortune?"

I spoke energetically as the occasion demanded, being, moreover, glad of an outlet. Before I had finished, however, she was back in her old position, with her face hidden from me by her hands. She puzzled me more than ever, for, after a long silence, she burst out, "Not my world, Oliver!"

The phrase shot up like a spout of lava from some deep centre of molten thought. I pitied and loved her, but I was helpless. To make a diversion I looked at my watch and luckily it was the time when the picket at the top should be changed, so I went to the door and opened it. A splendid blare of piping came in from the camp−fire as

I did so, and Margaret tripped to the door to listen.

"Who is it?" she asked.

"Donald," said I. "He's one of the great masters of the pipes. I believe in the tale of Amphion and the walls of Thebes now, for this afternoon I saw Donald pipe some broken−down wagons out of the road."

I went across to see to the change of picket, and when I got back into the hut I saw that the tension was over. I relit my pipe, sat down again at her side, and started a rapid series of questions as to what she had seen and heard during the retreat. Try how I would, nay, try as we would, we did not get back to our old footing. We were afraid of silences, and skipped from topic to topic at breakneck speed. We two who had sauntered together in the sunlight, now stumbled along in a mist.

At last she said she must be going, and I went out and shouted to Donald to get Bimbo and the calash ready, and four men as an escort. When I got back to her, she arose, somewhat wearily, and I put the domino on fully and fitted the hood round her head.

"You see I've gone back to the domino, Oliver," she said.

"It's the very thing for a cold night and a dirty road," I replied cheerfully, stepping in front of her, a couple of paces off, to take my last look at her in the light.

"I have never met a man who understands so much about women as you do," she said.

"Thank you, madam," I cried boisterously, and bowed so as to avoid her eyes. But when I was upright again, they caught mine once more, and something in them made me tremble.

"Or so little," she whispered, and she was pitifully white and miserable.

If it had not been for what I saw between us—there, on the floor of crazed and trampled mud, I should have flung my arms around her. But I could not step over *that*.

"Ta carrish iss ready," cried Donald from the door−sill.

I packed her snugly in the calash and started two dragoons ahead. Bimbo clucked to his horse and was off. I walked a hundred yards by the side of the carriage till it was time to whistle for the other dragoons to start. Then I made Bimbo pull up.

The young moon was battling with great stacks of clouds, but just at that moment won a brief victory, and gave me a clear view of Margaret. She put out her hand, which she had not yet gloved, and I took it in mine, bowed my head over it, and kissed it.

"Good night, Oliver," she whispered.

"Good night, Margaret," I replied, and whistled shrilly to hide my emotions. Something sent her away with her eyes ashine and her face glorious with a smile.

The dragoons clattered by, and I stood for a few minutes staring downhill. *And so little. Not my world. And so little. Not my world*. The words rang in my ears like a peal of bells. Then, by one of the odd tricks the mind plays us, I remembered that I had left the Hanyards for the work's sake, and that my love for Margaret could only be justified to myself—the only one who could ever know it—by my work. Over the black top there, down in the blacker valley, was the enemy, her enemy, nibbling up the space between us as a rabbit nibbles up a lettuce leaf. I closed my mind to the maddening chime, and started forthright to visit my picket.

The road was flush with the bare windswept summit. The crumpled ground was matted with coarse grass, almost too poor for sheep−feed. The camp−fire still blazed; near it a bagpipe crooned; now and again a horse shook in its harness. The moon whipped out for a moment, and then it was pitch dark again.

As I stepped it out there was a rush at me from the grass, behind and to my left. Down I dropped full length, and a man shot over me and sprawled in the road, but he was quick and lithe as a cat, and was up before me, for my slung arm disadvantaged me. I could just see his sword poised for a cut as he fairly pounced on me. I dived outward as he jumped, and he missed me, but before I could get behind him he was round and at me again like a fury. I was weaponless and crippled, but if I could once get past his sword, it would be all over with him. The pace was so hot, and my mind was so bent on the work, that I did not call for aid. At last I tricked him, for in jumping aside I flung my hat hard in his face, and in a flash had my right hand at his throat. He jabbed at me with his left, and I twisted round to his right side, pressing his sword−arm against his body, and digging my fingers into his windpipe. I heard his sword drop, and felt him feeling for a pistol. He was as hard as a nail, and I began to dream that he would get me before I had choked him.

Donald ended the matter. He, doglike in his fidelity, came striding down the road after me. The moon

outpaced the clouds again. He saw us at our death−grips, and came on with a rush and a yell. He drove his dirk into the nape of the man's neck and twisted the blade in its ghastly socket. A sharp, sickening click—and the man dropped out of my fingers like a stone. The moon went in again, and hid the evil thing from us.

“Pe she hurtit?” asked Donald anxiously.

“Not a scratch!” I replied.

“Tat's goot! Carry 'er up to the fire,” he added to three or four men who had run up on hearing his yell. “She's English and, maybe, she sall hae fine pickins on 'er.”

He stooped down, careless of a dead man as of a dead buck, and stropped his dirk clean and dry on the man's breeches. Then the men, equally indifferent, picked up the body and started off.

“D'ye ken wha the chiel is?” asked Donald, as we walked after them.

“A certain sergeant of dragoons, or one of his men,” I answered.

“He winna fash ye ony more,” said he. “Tat's a fine way of mine, when I can get behint a mon. I've killt mony a stot like it, shoost t' keep in the way of it.” And he stabbed the air, twisted his wrist, and clicked delightedly.

The men dumped the body near the fire. One of them stooped down and was for putting his hand in the man's pocket, but drew it back as if he had thrust it by mischance into the flames.

Then I knew.

I have heard a mare squeal in a burning stable, but I have never heard agony in sound as I heard it there, on the top of Shap, when Donald flung himself across the dead body of his chief and foster−brother.

There is one tender memory of this distressing scene. Neither by look, word, nor tone did Donald attach blame or responsibility to me. He recovered himself in a few minutes, and then stood up, and gave a brief command in Gaelic. Four awe−struck men spread a plaid on the ground, placed the dead body on it, and carried it into the hut. Donald, gravely silent, took the pipes from the man who had been playing, and followed them. I bared my head and went after him miserably.

Maclachlan's body lay on the floor of the hut. The eyes were wide open, but on his fine composed face there was no trace of the agony and passion in which he had gone before his God. It was as if, in that last terrible second, some vision of beauty had swept his soul clean. I knelt down and reverently closed the staring eyes.

“Donald,” said I, when I arose, “I would to God that you had killed me instead.”

“It's weird,” said he solemnly, “and weird mun hae way.”

I looked at him closely. That he was struck to the heart was plain to see, but, the first uprush of grief over, he had become sober, steadfast, almost business−like, as if he had something great in hand to do, and would be doing it.

He took the candle, now only the length of my ring−finger, and stuck it on the narrow window−ledge. Again he spoke to the men in Gaelic, and they moved out of the hut. Turning to me, he said, “Com in when ta licht gaes oot!”

He had the right to be alone with his dead. I wrung his hand and left him. When I looked back from the doorway, he was filling his bag with wind, but stopped to say, “Weird mun hae way.” And as he said it he smiled.

I crossed the road to the edge of the dip. More wood had been piled on the fire, which now blazed cheerfully. Most of the men lay asleep in their plaids, but a few stood guard over the horses, and the men who had carried the body into the hut were squatting on the grass by the roadside. I took my stand near them, and looked and listened.

The terrible similarity of Donald's case to mine appalled me. Each of us, in saving another, had struck down in the darkness a man near and dear to him. Two good men and true had gone when the lust of life is sweetest and the will to live strongest. I, who three weeks ago had never seen human life taken, had taken it, and seen it taken, as if men were of no more account than cattle. Between the house−place of the Hanyards and the top of Shap, Death had become my familiar.

For Maclachlan I had nothing but pity. He had thought that I stood between him and Margaret. Clearly he had learned of her coming back to me, and the thought had maddened him. He had disguised himself as an Englishman and come after me, and this was the end of it.

These were my thoughts as I watched the flickering flame dropping nearer and nearer to the window−ledge, and listened to the pipes. Donald was inspired. He and the pipes were one. In his hands they became a living thing. What he felt, they felt. They wept as he wept, they gloried as he gloried, they triumphed as he triumphed.

He began with a murmur of grief that grew into a wail, became a passionate tempest, and died into a

prolonged sob. Then he changed his note as memory wandered backward. The music became tenderly reminiscent, subduedly cheerful. They were again boys together at their play, youthful hunters swinging over the mountains after the red deer; young men with the maidens; warriors on their first foray. The threads of life ran in and out through the pattern of sounds he was weaving, and the older days of fighting and victories followed as I listened. There was hurrying, marching, charging; the groan of defeat; the mad slogan of final victory.

"He's fechtin' the Macleans noo," cried out one of the men, who had some English, and the others chattered vigorously for a minute in their own Gaelic.

The candle was now guttering on the window−ledge. These glories over, Donald came hard up against the end of them all—the Chief dead at his feet, slain by his own hand. For a time he faltered, playing only in little, melancholy snatches. Then he got surer, and the music began to come in blasts. He was seeing his way, learning what it all meant to him and the Maclachlans. Weird mun hae way. Destiny must work itself out. We children of a day are helpless before it.

The flame fell to a golden bead as the music grew in strength and purpose. There was a burst of light, a peal of triumph, and the music and the flame went out together.

Across the road I raced, threw open the door, and rushed in. Everything was dark and still.

"Donald!" I called passionately.

There was no reply. I crept on tip−toe to the fire and kicked the embers into a flame.

Donald was lying dead across the dead body of his Chief, his dirk buried to the hilt in his own heart.

* * * * *

At daybreak we buried them side by side in one grave on the top of Shap, their feet pointing northward to their own mountains. When the last clod had been replaced, and a great boulder reverently carried up to mark the spot, I turned, covered my head, and prepared to go, but the men stood on. I looked back. They were loath to go. Something that should be done, had been left undone.

I divined what they had in mind, turned back, bared my head as they uncovered, and repeated the Lord's Prayer aloud.

I am thankful to this day to those men whom fools and bigots call savages. They taught me to pray again.

"Man Captain," said the one who had English, as we walked away in a body, "ye wad mak' a gran' meenister."

I could not withhold a smile, but before I could reply there was a scattered rattle of shots from the dip. Looking around, I saw a body of enemy horse on the lower hill across the valley to my left.

We were overtaken. We should have to fight.

CHAPTER XXIV. MY LORD BROCTON PILES UP HIS ACCOUNT

On the tenth day of my captivity, hope glimmered for the first time. When a man has been penned up in a dull room for ten days, with half−a−hundred−weight of rusty iron shackling his wrists and ankles, with poor food, and little of it at that, to eat, he can extract comfort out of a trifle.

In my case the trifle was a smile, her first smile in ten days. So far she had been as sulky as she was shapeless, bringing me my poor meals either without saying a word or, at best, snapping me up and saying that I got far better treatment than a rebel deserved.

She never told me her name, and I never learned it from any other source, so 'she' she must remain for me and my tale. She was perhaps thirty, perhaps five feet high, the shape of a black pudding, with stony, rather than ugly, features, and cruel, cat−like eyes. I hated her handsomely till she smiled at me.

She was, I suppose, my jailer's daughter, or servant, or something of the sort. I never knew, and my ignorance does not matter. She brought me my food, spake or spake not, according to the degree of vileness in her prevailing humour, and went off, leaving me to my thoughts and my painful shamblings round my prison−chamber.

My ignorance was limitless. I was a prisoner, and my prison was a room in a sizable farm−house with thick stone walls. Where the house was I had no idea other than that it could not be far from the place where I was taken, which, again, could not be far from the town of Penrith. There was one window in my cell, the sill of which was as high from the ground as my chin when standing upright. But I never stood upright, being jammed into a cross made of good, solid iron, foul with rust, and having bracelets at the tips for my ankles and wrists. It kept me a foot short of my full stretch. I could get my eye to the edge of the window and no farther, and then I saw much sky and a little desolate moorland running up into a gauntly−wooded hill country.

I spent my waking hours thinking of Margaret and the others dreaming of her. Now was my chance to learn to do without her altogether. It would not be for long. I was in the Duke's clutches, and he would not let me go till my head rolled off my shoulders. Had I been free and with her, we should have been farther apart than before—by the width of Donald's grave. But here, parted for ever, with the block or the gallows just ahead of me, there was no bar to my lonely love. Time and time again she was so near to me, so vividly present to my imagination, that I stretched out my arms to grasp her. The shackles clanked, and I cursed myself for a fool, but I never cured myself of the habit.

Because this is the dreariest time of my life, I have plumped right into the middle of it to get it over. And, indeed, there is little worth the telling between the top of Shap and her smile. I was in jail because I was no soldier. That, apparently, should go without saying, and if I had come to grief over some piece of important soldier−craft, no one would have been surprised and I should not have been to blame. It galls me, however, to have to confess that I was very properly caught, jailed, and ironed for not knowing what a dragoon was. A man ought to know that after being captain of a troop of the best for a fortnight, but I didn't. Being all for logic, the least useful thing in life, I had arrived at the conclusion that a soldier on horseback is a horse−soldier. So he is, except when he's a dragoon, as I found to my cost. If the bold Turnus or Mr. Pink−of−Propriety Aeneas had hit upon the dragoon idea, I should have known all about it, because it would have been in Virgil. Even the Master has his deficiencies.

My Lord George Murray elected to fight at Clifton, a defendable place between Shap and Penrith. Just south of the bridge the road ran off the moor into the outskirts of the village, with a stone wall on one side and a high edge on the other. The enclosures on either side were packed with clansmen, and our wings stretched beyond on to the moor, here dissected into poor fields by straggling hedges.

The Colonel, the happiest man in England that day, had posted me across the road, right out on the moor, ready to gallop back at once with news of the enemy's approach. It was now quite dark, except when the moon rode free of the dense blotches of clouds that filled the sky. In one such glimpse of light, I caught sight of several bodies of horse on the moor to the east of the road. The regiment nearest to me wheeled to the left, and trotted obliquely across the road. Its direction made its purpose clear. It was feeling its way across our front to our flank on the west of the village. I rode back at once to report.

“Good lad!” said the Colonel, offering me his snuff−box. “It's just what we want 'em to do. Go where there's a

bellyful for you! Fine soldiering that! The fool duke ought to pound us out into the open with his guns. Hope you'll enjoy your first fight, Oliver! It's a glorious game. Pity of it is the counters are so costly. Good luck, my dear lad!"

I went back to my men whom I had left in the covered way between the wall and the hedge. It being clear that the exact whereabouts of the regiment I had particularly observed was of great consequence, I rode out again with a couple of men, at the request of one of the chiefs, to see if I could make out what was happening. There was no trace of it. It should by now have been visible on my right, the moon being out again, but there was not a single trace of it. I could see the line of one hedge and beyond that another. The other regiments had not advanced and this one had disappeared.

Perplexed, I halted my men, pulled the sorrel's head round and cantered slowly towards the nearer hedge. Then I learned that dragoons are horse−soldiers who fight on foot, behind hedges for choice. Half a dozen carbines rang out, the sorrel rolled over, and though I escaped the bullets and jumped clear of my horse, I was pounced on by a body of men and pulled ignobly through the hedge. I did everything doable, but they swarmed over me like ants, bore me down by weight of numbers, and sat on me.

"It's him right enough," I heard one of them say. "Fetch the sergeant! There's a bit of fat in this, lads!"

A minute later, I was hauled on to my feet. A seared face, with a dab−of−putty nose on it, leered delightedly into mine.

"Got you, by G—!" he said.

I had been captured by Brocton's dragoons. Now we should come to points.

Without another word to me, and after a savage injunction to the men to see I did not escape on peril of their lives, he went off and fetched his lordship. They came running back together as if the greatest event imaginable had happened.

"Ha! Master Wheatman," cried my lord very happily, "this is indeed a sight for sore eyes."

"To be sure," said I, "your lordship's were pretty bad the last time I saw them."

He made no retort, being indeed too excited to notice pin−pricks, but ordered the sergeant to take me to the rear under a strong guard. "Make sure of him!" he cried, and added in a lower tone, as I moved off under the combined pull and push of my captors, "Make sure of it." He then went off to his own place in the line.

The sergeant did not come with us, and I had been tugged nearly to the second hedge before he overtook us. To my astonishment he was carrying my saddle on his head, where, in the dim light, it looked like a gigantic bonnet. He swore at the men for loitering, and on we went to the second hedge. We struck it at a point where there was neither gate nor gap, but the dragoons bashed it down with their carbines and trampled it down with their boots, and so made a way.

Two of the men were through, and I was being hauled through, when there was a spattering of shots from behind. Over the noise a stentorian voice called out "Claymores!" It was the Highland warcry, and, with reverberating yells, the clansmen poured out of the nearer enclosure to attack the dragoons lining the hedge.

The sergeant drew his sword, and, as we raced on again, struck viciously with the flat of it at his men to make them run faster. A queer figure he cut in the moonlight as he raced along, swearing and slashing, with the skirts of the saddle flapping against his lean ribs. At last we got out on a poor road lined with trees and turned south along it. There was urgent need for him to haste now, for Brocton's dragoons had been cut out of their cover and were being pushed back to the hedge we had just left. The sergeant halted a moment to take stock of the situation, and then we hurried on again. Every time he struck a man for lazy running, the man in his turn paid me with punch or kick. After a mile or so, the avenue made an abrupt turn to the east and brought us out on the main road in the rear of the Duke's army.

The moon showed us a little cottage, standing off from the road in a poor plot of ground. The sergeant led the way up to it, turned the cottager and his family out of it into a shed, and set two men without as sentries. He then made the others strip me to the skin and examined every shred of clothing, ripping out the linings and even cutting my boots to pieces. Finding nothing, he flung me the rags to put on again, and then cut the saddle to pieces and searched that. I knew now why William had so nearly lost his vail and Donald had been obliged to steal me another saddle. The sergeant wanted, the letter and papers I had taken from him at the "Ring of Bells." He was so keen that he omitted to pouch any of my belongings, and I retained my money, Donald's watch, and the priceless strip of bloodstained linen. My tuck and pistols were naturally taken from me on my capture.

"Any luck?" I asked quizzingly, when he at last gave over the search.

Too furious or too cautious to reply, he brutally kicked a dragoon whom he caught smiling.

After a miserable drag of some two hours, a fresh dragoon came with a message, whereon the sergeant conducted me to the presence of the Duke, who was quartered in a large house in the village. The Lord Brocton, the Lord Mark Kerr, and other officers were with him, and also several ladies who would have been more at home in Vauxhall. For a minute or two I was unheeded, and the sergeant could hardly keep himself sufficiently stiff and awkward. His Grace was in the sourest of humours for, as the talk showed, he had been beaten. The claymores had taken the conceit out of him finely. He finished the subject with a string of oaths and then made an unprintable inquiry of Brocton concerning me. The ladies tittered profusely, and the most powdery one vowed that His Grace was a great wag. In further proof of this he snatched a feather near a yard long out of her pompom, and fanned himself with it while he examined me.

This ducal waggishness gave me time to observe that the sergeant's uneasiness was icy coldness in comparison with his lordship's. He was uncertain of speech; his face was the colour of pea−soup; he looked anxiously, almost affrightedly, at me. He grew plainly more comfortable as the Duke failed to get any information out of me beyond the fact that the weather was cold. Finally, when the sergeant was ordered to keep me at his peril till such time as I could be lodged in Carlisle jail, Brocton greedily tossed off a bumper of wine and laughed aloud at some vulgar sally from a lady in a green paduasoy. On leaving I bowed to the Duke. He was a vigorous, able man with the manners and morals of a bull.

Brocton followed the sergeant out. There was a consultation between them of which I heard nothing, but the result was that the sergeant picked up a man as guide who was waiting at the front door, obviously for the purpose, and took me through and beyond the village to a house on the roadside. The place was of fair size, built of rough slabs of stone, and evidently a farm−house. The owner was a lumpish, ungainly fellow, astonishingly bow−legged. He had a little yapping dog, which jumped backwards and forwards between his knees like a trick−dog through a hoop.

Preparations had been made for my coming, "by his lordship," as the farmer blabbed out. I was taken upstairs to a back room, ironed, in the way I have described, by the parish constable, who had been prayed in aid for the job, and locked in in the dark. I heard a sentry posted without the door and another beneath the window. It was some consolation, and I needed all I could get, to know I was so prized. There was a rough bed in the room. I tumbled on it, wondered for a few minutes what Margaret would be thinking of it all, and then went to sleep.

Next morning I made her acquaintance to this extent that she brought me a jug of thin ale, a lump of horse−bread and a slab of cheese. Her looks froze my affability, but she does not become important till she smiled, and I need say no more about her at present.

I saw no other person till nightfall of the third day, when the door opened and the little dog hopped through his accustomed gap into the room, and was followed by his master carrying a lighted tallow candle in a rusty iron candlestick. This imported something unusual, as I was not allowed a light, and it turned out to be a visit from my Lord Brocton. He ordered the sentry to follow the farmer downstairs, and examined the door carefully to see if it was closed thoroughly. I sat on the edge of the bed and hummed a brisk air with a fine pretence of indifference.

He sat down on the one chair there was, placed his hat on the table, and said, "I am sorry to see you in this place and condition, Mr. Wheatman."

"Thank you," said I.

"Of course you know there's only one end of it."

"Yes," I replied, and hummed a stave of "Lillibullero."

He leaned forward and said impressively, "The gibbet, Mr. Wheatman!"

"Draughty places!" said I, smiling, as I thought of Nance Lousely. "I can feel the wind whistling through my bones."

"You are pleased to be facetious, sir. It does credit, I must say, to your nerves."

"You are pleased to be sympathetic, my lord," I riposted, "whereby you do no credit to my common sense."

He took short breaths and then reflected a minute or two, during which I clinked a soft tattoo with my iron wristlets, and eyed him joyously. He was there—a free lordling, I was here—a chained rebel, but I had him set.

"I have a proposal to make to you, Mr. Wheatman," he said at length.

"I am indeed honoured, but be careful, my lord! It's not in the least likely, I fear, to be a proposal which you

would like the sentry beneath the window to overhear."

"You are plain and blunt," he said, leaning forward and speaking in a low tone, "and I will be the same. Return me all the papers you took from my sergeant at the 'Ring of Bells,' and I will see that you escape and get clear of the country."

"The different personal ends for which you are anxious to turn traitor seem innumerable, my lord!"

He met the taunt as if it had been a flip with a straw, and only said, "Is it a bargain?"

"It is not," I replied emphatically.

If his life rather than his lands had depended on the recovery of the letter he could not have been more eager. For a long time he pleaded and wrestled with me; arguing, bullying, imploring, threatening, turn and turn about, but to no result. I would not go back on my casual word to Master Freake. The letter was important to him, and he would save Margaret and the Colonel, and me too, when the inevitable hour of need should come at last. Money was power, and lands were more than money. Acres meant votes, and with votes at your command you had ministers at your beck. I was sure of Master Freake. Why bother about my lord Brocton?

At last he played his last card. "You shall have the Upper Hanyards back again, Master Wheatman," he quavered.

The rascal earl, his father, had juggled more than a thousand acres of the Hanyards away from my father by some musty process of law and a venal bench. The reference angered me, and I cried loudly, "You shall not have it back at any price!"

He looked at the window, and paled as he thought of the sentinel ears without. Then he went off, vomiting curses.

That day week, she brought me a shepherd's pie for dinner, very well made too, and a mug of ale not wholly unworthy of the name. She put them down, looked at me in a measure womanly, and smiled. It was a root of promise and fruit would follow. Any change would be welcome. I was ragged, dirty, galled, cramped, and bearded with a red stubble. She called me 'Carrots' in derision.

I was right. At evening she brought me up a dish of tea, and when I lifted it off the table to take a drink of it, there was beneath it a paper folded letter−fashion.

I steadied myself, drank my tea with only moderate haste, and then cautiously palmed my treasure and walked to the window. Standing with my back to the door, so that the sentry, who was given to popping his head in to have a look at me, could not catch me unawares, I opened the paper. It was a letter. It was written by a woman. The woman was Margaret.

"You will be taken to−morrow to Carlisle. On the way friends will rescue you and bring you to me. Fear nothing, say nothing, and all will be well. Till to−morrow, dear Oliver. Destroy this. MARG. W."

It went hard against the grain to destroy this precious missive. I hid in the corner, and kissed it ravenously a hundred times. How straight and true the pen had ploughed its way across the paper! It was just such writing as I had expected of her, the resolute escription of her sweet, resolute self. Nor was the problem of destroying it easy to solve, since I had no fire, and there was no sure hiding−place accessible to my manacled hands. I mastered the difficulty heroically by eating the letter with my bread and butter.

It was even harder to pretend to be dull and sluggish with such a whirl of happy thoughts in my mind. I was her "dear Oliver," dear enough to make her risk her own life in saving mine. That she would plan wisely and execute swiftly, there was no shadow of doubt. This time tomorrow we should be together again.

The night dragged through at last, and the first glimmer of dawn found me alert and hopeful. She brought my usual breakfast at the usual time, and smiled again, but put her finger on her lips to warn me to be silent and careful.

She went downstairs, and left to myself again, I grew furious to think that Margaret would see me so, a regular wild man of the woods— *quantum mutatus ab illo Hectare*. But my ravings ceased at the sound of preparations without. My room was at the back of the house, but I heard the noise of wheels, and hoof−beats, and the harsh swearing of the sergeant. By and by he came noisily upstairs, burst into my room, and curtly ordered me downstairs.

Blithely I followed him. Try how I would I could not hide my joy, and, seeing that he noted it, I said in explanation, "Anything for a change, sergeant!"

"You'll wish yourself back here soon enough, blast ye!" he growled. "We'll stretch your neck for you till your

eyes drop out, you swine!”

“You dear, good, Christian soul!” I simpered.

For answer, he kicked me savagely, and then bundled me downstairs, out of the house, and into the road. Here a two−horsed coach was in waiting, with two dragoons and a corporal in front and two more behind. One of the rear men was holding a horse, and to my annoyance the sergeant got into the coach after me, bawled out a command, and off our party started.

I stumbled into a corner and sat huddled up, straining my eyes ahead to catch what was to come. Margaret's information was clearly correct. We took the road north, passed through Penrith without a halt, and out again, still on the turnpike, proof that Carlisle was to be our destination. The city was obviously now in the Duke's power.

Mile after mile we covered apace, and at every curve and cross−road I peered ahead and around with my heart in my mouth. One point in my favour was the desolate nature of the country, exactly fitted for such a stratagem as was in hand. On the right the gloomy sky was blotted out by jagged masses of gloomier hills. On the left the country varied between flat and upland, but was hardly less uninviting.

“Where d'ye think y're going?” asked the sergeant, joggling me with his spurred heel to make me look at him.

“No idea,” said I.

“Blast ye. I wish y'had,” he growled viciously, and I turned away to smile.

We passed through a village littered with the Duke's baggage wagons and pretty full of soldiery. This chilled my spirit somewhat, for it looked as if we were about to run into the rear of the Royal army. Outside the village, however, we again had the road to ourselves, and a mile farther on dropped to a walk to climb a long slant of road.

Whenever the road curved my way I had seen the corporal and his two men riding from fifty to a hundred yards ahead of us. Not very far up the slope we came on a farmstead lying flush on the roadside. In the yard were some thirty head of shaggy black cattle, of the northern kind seldom seen in our parts and therefore attractive to a farmer's eye. A farm−hand leaning over the gate had some noisy gossip with the dragoons as they passed, and bawled his news to a group of men sitting at meat under a hovel. It was a poor enough place to support so many men, for the farm−wife, who came to her kitchen door to see what the clatter was about, was of no better seeming than a yokel's wife with us. My eyes were on her curiously when the man on the gate skipped off and flung it open right across the muzzles of our horses.

In the tick of a clock the whole scene changed. The men under the hovel rushed out, fell on the cattle, thrashed them mercilessly with great battoons, yelled at them like maniacs, and drove them in a shoving, bellowing, maddened mass into the road, which here had a stone wall on the side opposite the farm. When the torrent was fairly going, two of the supposed yokels snatched up carbines, climbed on to the hovel, and opened fire on the dragoons in our rear.

The master hand of the Colonel was in this beyond a doubt. With a loud curse, the sergeant, who was on the side away from the farm, opened the door and was for leaping out. He bethought himself and half turned, one hand on the door and one foot on the step, to look an evil inquiry at me. That half−turn was his undoing. Part of the living, struggling torrent of cattle was shoved round our way and came sweeping by. One beast brushed the door open even as he glared at me and tumbled him outwards. As he twisted in his fall another drove her sharp horns clean into him, and shook and twirled him off again like a terrier playing with a rat. The rearguard turned tail and fled. The vanguard had simply been swept off the scene, and I saw them spurring up the slope with the cattle surging after them. The plan had been thought out to a nicety and had worked to perfection. I was free, free for Margaret. I sat down again dizzied and happy.

My rescuers took no notice of me but ran down the road in a body and stood round the sergeant. After some excited talk they carried him back, called on me to aid, and rammed him into the coach, where he lay huddled on the seat in front of me. Without so much as a word to me, the commander pulled our driver off the box, ordered a man up in his place, climbed after him, and said briefly, “Go like the devil!”

The carriage turned up a rough lane which ran eastward out of the high road opposite the farm, leaving most of my rescuers standing uncertain in a group. The driver cut his horses savagely with his whip, and we went at a hard gallop. The jolting tumbled me about in the coach, and I had hard work, shackled as I was, to keep the sergeant on the seat. He was still alive, though so hideously injured that death could only be a question of minutes. Where we were going and why they were carrying him along with us, were questions it was useless to

bother about. Margaret would explain everything when we met. I could make little of the men who had rescued me. They were clearly not farm−hands, for they were well armed, the guns I had seen looked to me to be military carbines, and they had carried through their business briskly and intelligently.

I heard the men on the box talking, but their speech was only about the road and the speed. The country got rougher and wilder; the distant hills were losing their clear−cut, rolling outlines, and becoming neighbours and obstacles. The horses were thrashed unmercifully, but at times even the well−plied whip could get no more than a crawl out of them.

The sergeant's end was at hand. He rallied, as men commonly do before they put foot in the black river, and looked at me unrecognizingly. He closed his eyes again, and began to writhe and mutter strange words. Suddenly he cried plainly, “Curse the swine! Another wedge, ye damned chicken−heart!” He looked at me again, and this time made out who I was, and cursed loathsomely in his disappointment.

“D'ye know where y're going?” he ended, leering wickedly.

“No,” said I.

“Blast ye! I wish ye did!” He gurgled this almost jocosely, as if it were a pet bit of humour.

“Do you know where you are going?” I asked solemnly.

“To hell,” he cried, and, after a spout of blood that spattered me as I leaned over him, went.

The carriage stopped and, before I could rise to see why, the door was opened and some one without said politely, “This is indeed a pleasure, Master Wheatman!”

It was my lord Brocton.

* * * * *

It would be foolish to pretend that I was not bitten to the bone, and I can only hope that I did not give outward expression to a tithe of the chagrin and dismay that possessed me. Being commanded to do so, I got out of the coach without a word and looked around.

The rough road along which we had been travelling ran on through a slit in the hills. Where we stood a bridle−path parted from it at a sharp angle and made its way over the lower skirts of the hill country. It was a desolate, dreary spot where, as I suspected, the king's writ ran not and where, therefore, a man might be done to death with all conveniency. Master Freake would be useless to me now, and my chiefest enemy had me at his will.

There was no delay. A long cloak was put over me, so disposed as to hide my fetters, and I was lifted on a spare horse led by one of the new−comers. The skill with which the affair had been planned was shown by the fact that this horse, to accommodate my shackled legs, had been saddled as for a lady.

“You know exactly what to do?” asked his lordship of the men on the coach.

“Yes, my lord,” said one of them, “but what about—” He finished the sentence by a jerk of his thumb towards the dead sergeant.

“Leave him there! Egad, Master Wheatman, is not that a touch of the real artist?”

“The key of these things is in his breeches' pocket,” said I, speaking for the first time, and waggling my fetters as I did so.

“Get it out, Tomlins!”

The man who had asked the question climbed down and obeyed the order with the callousness of a dog nosing a dead rabbit. Then our parties separated. The coach continued along the main road, if so it may be called, and we took to the track. I looked curiously after the coach, wondering where it was bound, and with what object.

“More art,” said his lordship. “A coach is a seeable, trackable thing, and it will throw everybody off the scent. I'm glad the ruffian's dead. He was overmuch wise in my affairs.”

As we rode on into the interminable wastes, he rallied me gleefully, but soon tired of my moroseness.

“His arrival will make an affecting picture,” he said mockingly to his men. He was feverishly excited, and must boast to some one. “No pliant damsel to rush into his longing arms! He is to be embraced though, my masters, if need be.”

What this obscure threat might portend, I could not see, but it chimed in with the delirious cruelty of the dead sergeant. Threats for the future mattered not, the present being so unendurable. A man in Brocton's position must be hard put to it to turn traitor in this strange fashion. He had “rescued” me with his own men, and, lord or no lord, he would hang for it were it once known to a lover of the gibbet like the Duke's Grace of Cumberland. What

on earth was the letter about? Master Freake had definitely said lands, and therefore lands it must be, though nothing less than the whole Ridgeley estates could be in question. The thousand and more acres of the Upper Hanyards, sweet meadows stretching a mile along the river and a snatch of the chase at its wildest and loveliest, the prize that had fallen to the rascal earl in the great lawsuit, had been promised me as readily as a pinch of snuff. I gloated over the revenge I was winning for my race, a race rooted in those darling Hanyards a century before the Ridgeleys were heard of, for the first earl, the grandfather of the old rogue, started as an obscure pimp to Charles the Second, and was enriched and ennobled for his assiduity.

But no familiary pride could cheer me for long. The dead landscape around chilled me. The chiefest misery was to remember the hope with which I had started that morning. Margaret was the fancied end of my journey, and the real end was this! I had to bite my lips till I felt the trickle of blood in the stubble on my chin to keep back unmanly revilings.

At last we came out on what was by comparison a made road, and now his lordship grew plainly anxious and haggard. We rode madly along it, so that, riding shackled and woman−fashion, I had hard work to keep my seat. Brocton's head was incessantly on the turn to see if we were observed, but his luck was absolute. We saw no one on the road, and, after a hard stretch, we turned up a gully to our left and were once more buried among the hills.

After much turning and twisting we came in sight of a small house of grey stone which, from its appearance and situation, I judged to be some gentleman's shooting lodge. We cut across the valley, on one slope of which it stood, and I caught a glimpse of cottage roofs beyond it. We worked round to the rear of the house, and, in a favouring clump of trees, his lordship called a halt. The horses were tethered, and I was lifted down, and the rings round my ankles were unlocked. The men took one each, and carried their carbines in their free hands. Brocton drew his rapier, and said, “Forward! Make a sound, show the slightest sign of resistance, and I run you through.”

There was no sense in disobeying, and I accommodated myself to his design, which was clearly to get into the house unobserved from without. In this he was successful, or at any rate I saw no one during our crawl from one point of vantage to another up to the back entrance. Now his lordship skipped gaily from behind me and opened the door. He stepped softly in, and I was pushed after him by his dragoons.

“'Friends will rescue you and bring you to me,'“ he quoted, jeering me. “There's no Margaret for you, Farmer Wheatman. I shall have her yet!” Then, beast as he was, while the men kept me back, nearly tearing my arms out of their sockets, he stuck the point of his rapier over my heart and babbled half−delirious beastliness.

We were in a big, bare kitchen, the other door of which was closed. There was no sign of anyone about, and Brocton, still with his sword ready for me, bawled out, “Where are you, you old hag?”

The door opened at once. Brocton dropped his sword in his fright and I clapped my foot on it. The two men fled like rabbits. Familiar as the picture is to my mind, it is hard to find words to fit this crowning moment of my adventures.

Margaret walked into the room.

For a second she was minded to rush at me, but thought better of it, and walked up to his lordship. She towered over his limp, cringing figure, and said coldly, “You are too poor a cur to be struck by a woman or I would strike you.”

She was not alone. Master Freake was now wringing my shackled hands delightedly, and a little, deft man, whom I knew on sight to be Dot Gibson, was searching his unresisting lordship's pockets for the key of the irons. A minute later he banged them on the floor and said, “And how do you find yourself, sir?”

There's no more to be said about Brocton. He was as good as dead for the remainder of the business, and no one heeded him any more than if he had been a loathsome insect that a man's foot had trodden on. And what killed him was the presence of a third man, a perfect stranger to me. He was an old−looking rather than an old man, with rheumy eyes that looked through narrow slits, and a big unshapely nose; the skin of his face was brown and crinkled like a dried−up bladder; his whole appearance as a man was mean and paltry. What distinction he had was given him by gorgeous clothing and the attendance of a pompous ass in a flaming livery. Yet Brocton dared not look at him again, as he shuffled forward on his man's arm to speak to Master Freake.

“Mr. Freake,” he piped, laying an imploring hand on the merchant's arm, “you will not be too hard on my foolish son?”

It was the old rascal Earl of Ridgeley. I had not seen him since the trial, when I was but a lad. In the meantime vice had eaten out of him such manliness as had ever been in him. Rascaldom was still stamped on him, but he

was now in a state of abject terror. He and his son were indeed, as Jane puts it to this day, two to a pair.

“Your lordships will be pleased to wait on me in the room yonder,” said Master Freake, in his grave, decisive way, “and I will tell you my will on the matter.”

He bowed ironically towards the door. Their unlordly lordships went off together, and he followed and closed the door behind him. Dot sensibly hustled off the lackey, and so we were alone together.

As ever, I had my full reward. She turned to me, took my hands in hers, and whispered, “My splendid Oliver!”

“What, madam?” said I, laughing lest I should do otherwise and most unbecomingly. “In a red beard?”

“You look like a Cossack!” she declared, laughing in her turn.

So, in the way we had, we kept ourselves at arm's length from each other and dropped at once into our old footing.

Then, bit by bit, and unwillingly, and mainly in answers to my questions, she told a tale that made my heart bound within me. This is the mere skeleton of it, for I have no skill to give body and soul to such devotion.

The Colonel brought the news of my capture by Brocton, pieced together from the stories of my men, who got back unhurt, and of one of Brocton's dragoons who was luckily taken prisoner in order to be questioned. Margaret had immediately started on horseback for London, with one English servant in attendance, going by Appleby to evade the Duke's army, and across the mountains to Darlington. There she had travelled flying post down the great north road, getting to London in five days thirteen hours after her start from Penrith.

Master Freake had started back with her within five hours of her arrival. They travelled post through Leicester and Derby, and then on over ground that was familiar. No wonder I had thought her near, since she had passed within fifty paces of me as I shambled about dreaming of her. Part of the five hours' delay in London was taken up by a visit paid by Master Freake to the Earl of Ridgeley. He had gone forth stern and resolute. What had happened she did not know, but as they sped north the Earl sped north a mile behind them, as if they were dragging him along by his heart−strings. At Carlisle, now in the hands of the Duke, they drew blank, for Brocton was unaccountably absent from military duty. Fortunately Margaret, from the window of her room, saw the sergeant ride by. Dot was sent on his track and learned that Brocton was here, the house being a hunting−lodge belonging to a crony of his who was an officer in the Cumberland militia. They had ridden out that morning to see him, at which point her tale linked up with mine and ended.

“I am greatly indebted to you, Margaret,” said I, very lamely, slipping out her name at unawares.

“Nonsense!” she cried. “May I not do as much as your pet ghostie did for you without being a miracle? Do not you dare, sir, to offer me a pinnerfull of guineas!”

She looked at me with a merry twinkle in her eyes, and I feel sure I knew what she was thinking of. But Nance Lousely was a simple country maiden, such as I was born and bred amongst, and at that time I had no vile red stubble, rough as a horse−comb, on my chin.

We were interrupted by the lackey, who came with Mr. Dot Gibson's respects to his honour, and would his honour like the refreshment of a shave and a bath as both were at his service? Like master, like man. This resplendent person was for the nonce humility's self. I went with him and was made clean and comfortable, and my rags trimmed a little.

This was preliminary to being summoned by Master Freake to a discussion with their lordships, with whom was Margaret, aloof and icy.

“At the 'Ring o' Bells,'“ began Master Freake, addressing me, “you took from my lord Brocton's sergeant, now dead, a bundle of papers?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Among them a letter addressed simply, 'To His Royal Highness'?”

“That is so, sir.”

“You gave that letter to me, unopened, in the presence of Mistress Waynflete?”

“I did,” said I, and Margaret nodded agreement.

“Several attempts have been made to recover the letter from you?”

“At least three such attempts were made by the late sergeant, and two by my lord Brocton,” I replied.

“Their lordships' urgent need of recovering the letter is thus proven, and the Court will attach due weight to the facts,” said Master Freake. Brocton turned white as a sheet, and the old rogue shook as a dead leaf shakes on its twig before the wind strips it off. There was in them none of the family pride which keeps the great families

agoing.

"I opened the letter. I mastered its contents. I still have it," continued Master Freake, every sentence, like the crash of a sledge−hammer, making these craven bystanders shake at the knees. "It is deposited, sealed up again, with a sure friend, who has instructions, unless I claim it in person on or before the last day of this year, to deliver it in person to the King. At present no one knows its contents except my lord Brocton who wrote it, and I who read it."

"Thank God!" ejaculated the rascal old earl fervently.

"Egad," thought I to myself. "It's the Ridgeley estates no less."

"We will call it, for the purposes of our discussion," said Master Freake soothingly, "a letter about certain lands."

"Yes! Yes! Certainly! A letter about lands! So it was!" cried the Earl eagerly, and Brocton began to look less like a coward on the scaffold.

"Would you prefer any other designation or description, my lords?" inquired Master Freake.

"I'm quite satisfied, my good Master Freake," babbled the Earl.

"What lands?" I burst out, unable to hold in my curiosity any longer.

"The lands known as the Upper Hanyards in the county of Staffordshire," replied Master Freake.

"Well I'm ——," cried I, in amazement, but pulling up in time, and Margaret's blue eyes were as wide open as mine.

"You are, Master Oliver Wheatman," said Master Freake, "the future, rightful owner of the ancient estate of your family in all its former amplitude; and all arrearages of rents and incomings as from the thirteenth of April, one thousand seven hundred and thirty−two, with compound interest at the rate of ten per cent per annum, together with a compensation for disturbance and vexation caused to you and yours, provisionally fixed in the sum of two thousand pounds. The Earl of Ridgeley, smitten to the heart by the remembrance of his roguery and knavery, has agreed to make this full restitution. Am I right, my lord?"

"Absolutely, Master Freake, if you please," whined the rascal old earl. "My God, I'm a ruined man!"

"Well, my lord," said Master Freake, "if you lose your lands and moneys, and I will not bate an acre or a guinea of the full tale, you and your son will at least retain what, as I see, you both value more highly. The restitution is to be made by you to me personally, so that we can avoid quibbles about Oliver's legal position, he being a rebel confessed, and the day after he is inlawed I will in my turn convey the property in both kinds to him. When the restitution has been fully and legally made, without speck or flaw in title, and passed as such by my lawyers, the letter will be returned to you sealed as now, and of course I shall be rigidly silent on the matter. Your lordships," he ended coldly, "may start for London at once to see to the matter."

The old earl started for the door eagerly, calling down on his son dire and foul curses. Brocton looked poisonously at me before following, and I knew I had not done with him yet.

"I've got you your lands, Oliver, but there has been no time to get you pardoned. The King was at Windsor; every moment was precious; and there was no use, in the temper of the town, in dealing with underlings. It will not do to run any risk of your being retaken, for Cumberland loves blood−letting, and is no friend of mine. We shall take you to a little fishing village on the Solway and get you a cast over to Dublin, whither my good ship, 'Merchant of London,' Jonadab Kilroot, Master, outward bound for the Americas, will pick you up. When we all meet again in London, in a few months, you will be pardoned. Margaret and I must now follow her father. The Stuart cause is smashed to pieces."

* * * * *

Late that night I stood with Margaret on the end of a jetty in a little fishing village on the Cumberland coast. Master Freake was giving final instructions to the owner of a herring−buss that was creaking noisily against the side of the jetty under the swell of the tide. Dot was busily handing to one of her crew of two certain packages for my use.

We stood together, and she had linked her arm in mine. We who had been so close together for a month were now to have an ocean put between us. Not that that mattered to me, already separated from her by something wider than the Atlantic, a lonely unnamed grave away there in Staffordshire.

Suddenly she called to Dot, and he, as knowing just what she wanted, brought her a box. She loosed her arm from mine and took it from him, and when I would in turn have relieved her of it, she gently refused.

“Oliver,” she said, in quiet, firm tones, “you met me when I was in grave danger and immediately, like the gallant gentleman you are, left mother and home to do me service.”

“It was the privilege of my life, madam,” I said earnestly.

“You have sweetened your service by so regarding it, giving greatly when you gave. And, sir, that service put me in your debt. You see that?”

“It is like you to say so. What of it?”

“The time came when you were in danger, and I, in my turn, left my father and rode hard to save you. I am not boasting, you understand, sir. I am merely stating a fact. I rendered service for service, like for like, did I not, sir?”

“You did, madam, and did it splendidly,” said I.

“Then, sir, when we meet again,” she said, and she was now speaking very clearly and sweetly, looking me full in the eyes, potent in all her beauty and queenliness, “when we meet again, we meet on level terms.”

“Are you ready, lad?” called Master Freake.

“Coming, sir!” I cried, almost glad at heart of the escape.

“One moment, Oliver!” said Margaret. “So anxious to be rid of me? Nay, I jest of course! I've a little present for you here, Oliver. It will, I hope, make you think of me at times.”

“It will not,” I replied, smiling. “It will make me think oftener of you, that's all.”

She handed me the box, and we walked up to the boat.

The half−moon was bright in an unclouded sky, and it showed me tears on Margaret's cheeks, as I bent to clasp and kiss her hand. Then I said good−bye to Master Freake and Dot, and was helped into the boat.

So we parted, and I set my face toward the New World. For ten weary months there is nothing to be said that belongs of right and necessity to my story.

Except this: The first thing I did when I was alone in my cabin on the good ship, the “Merchant of London,” was to open Margaret's box. It contained a full supply of books wherefrom to learn “the only language one can love in,” and on the fly−leaf of a sumptuous “Dante” she had written, “From Margaret to Oliver.”

CHAPTER XXV. I SETTLE MY ACCOUNT WITH MY LORD BROCTON

Of how I fared the seas with Jonadab Kilroot, master of the stolid barque, “Merchant of London,” I say nothing, or as good as nothing. Master Kilroot was a noisy, bulky man, with a whiff of the tar−barrel ever about him and a heart as stout as a ship's biscuit. He feared God always, and drubbed his men whenever it was necessary; in his estimation the office of sea−captain was the most important under heaven, and Master John Freake the greatest man on earth.

The ship remained at anchor in Dublin harbour while tailors and tradesmen of all sorts fitted me out, for Master Freake had given me guineas enough for a horse−load. I did very well, for Dublin is a vice−regal city, with a Parliament of its own and reasonable society, so that the modes and fashions are not more than a year or so behind London, which did not matter to a man going to the Americas.

From Dublin I wrote home. I had laid one strict injunction on Margaret. She was not to go to the Hanyards, or write there, or allow anyone else to do either. I would not suffer her to know, or to run any chance of knowing, about Jack. She was greatly troubled over the matter, but I was so decided that she consented to my demand. It cost me a world of pains to write. I wrote, rewrote, and tore up scores of letters. Finally I merely sent them word that I was going to America to wait till the trouble was blown over, and that I should be with them again as soon as possible. I gave them no address. It was cowardly, but I could not bring myself to it. The nightmare that haunted me was my going home, home to our Kate, the sweetest sister man ever had, with her young heart wrapped for ever in widow's weeds. I used to dream that I rode up to the yard−gate on Sultan, and every time, in my dream, the Hanyards looked so desolate and woebegone, as if the very barns and byres were mourning for the dear dead lad who had played amongst them, that I pulled Sultan round and spurred him away till he flew like the wind, and I woke up in a cold sweat.

On a Wednesday morning in the middle of February the “Merchant of London” swung into Boston Harbour on a full tide and was moored fast by the Long Wharf. Master Kilroot hurried me ashore to the house of the great Boston merchant, Mr. Peter Faneuil, to whom I carried a letter from Master Freake. It was enough. My friend's protecting arm reached across the Atlantic, and if it were part of my plan to tell at length of my doings in the New World, I should have much to say about this worthy merchant of Boston. He was earnest and assiduous in his kindness, and so far as my exile was pleasant he made it so.

Mr. Faneuil was urgent that I should take up my abode with him, but this I gratefully declined, and he thereon recommended me to lodge with the widow of a ship−captain who had been drowned in his service. So I took lodging with her at her house in Brattles Street, and she made me very comfortable. She had a daughter, a pretty frolic lass of nine, who promoted me uncle the first day, and one negro slave, who was the autocrat of the establishment till my coming put his nose out of joint, as we say in Staffordshire.

Master Kilroot unshipped most of his inward cargo and sailed away for Carolina and Virginia to get rice and tobacco. Then he would come back here to make up his return cargo with dried fish, to be exchanged at Lisbon for wine for England. This was his ordinary round of trade, and a very profitable traffic it was.

When he had left, I settled down to make my exile profitable. By a great slice of luck there was at this time in Boston an Italian, one Signor Zandra, who gave lessons in his native tongue openly and in the art of dancing secretly. The wealth of the town was growing apace; there was a leisured class, and, speaking generally, the Bostonians were alert of mind and desirous of knowledge above any other set of men I have ever lived among. In the near−by town of Cambridge there was a vigorous little university with more than a hundred students. Moreover, there was a rising political spirit which gave me a keen interest in the men who breathed the quick vital air of this vigorous new England. In many respects I found myself back in the times of Smite−and−spare−not Wheatman, captain of horse in the army of the Lord−General. The genuine, if somewhat narrow, piety of the Bostoneers reminded me of him, and still more their healthy critical attitude towards rulers in general and kings in particular. They had the old Puritan stuff in them too, for some eight months before they had captured Louisberg from the French, a famous military exploit which the great Lord−General would have gloried in.

My days were all twins to each other. Every morning, after breakfast, I went abroad and always the same way: past the quaint Town House, down King Street, and so on to the Long Wharf to see if a ship had come in from

England, and to ask the captain thereof if he had brought a letter for one Oliver Wheatman at Mr. Peter Faneuil's. I got no letter and no news. Then, always a little sad in heart, I strolled back, and looked in at Wilkins' book−shop, where some of the town notables were always to be found, and where, one May morning, as I was higgling over the purchase of a fine Virgil, I made the acquaintance of a remarkable young gentleman, Mr. Sam Adams, a genius by birth, a maltster by trade, and a politician by choice. We would discuss books together in Master Wilkins', or slip out to a retired inn called “The Two Palaverers” and discuss politics over a glass of wine and a pipe of tobacco. I liked him so much that I was afraid to tell him I had been fighting for the Stuarts, and was content to pass in the role Mr. Faneuil had assigned to me of an ingenuous young English gentleman who had come out to study colonial matters on the spot before entering Parliament. Our talk over, I went on to Signor Zandra's and worked at Italian for two hours. Most days I took him back to my lodging for dinner and read and talked Italian with him for another hour or two. The rest of the day I gave to reading, exercising, and, thanks to the good merchant, to the best society in Boston.

Occasionally, when I knew for certain that no ship would clear for home for two or three days, I made little shooting journeys inland, but in the main this is how I spent my days, filling them with work and distraction so as not to have idle hours for idler thinking. Spring passed, summer came and went, and the leaves were turning from gold to brown when one morning, as I was at breakfast, Mr. Faneuil's man came in with a letter. It was from Master Freake, summoning me home as all was put right. It contained a few lines from Margaret, written in Italian. A ship was sailing for London that day, and I went on her.

* * * * *

Jonadab Kilroot had found his way across the Atlantic into Boston Harbour much more easily than I was finding mine across London to Master Freake's house in Queen Anne's Gate. It was after nine at night, at which late hour, of course, I did not intend to arouse the inmates, but I meant to find the place so that I could stand outside and imagine Margaret within, perchance dreaming of me. At last I observed that men with torches were clearly being used as guides through this black maze of streets, and I stopped one such and offered him a guinea to do his office for me. He was a lean, shabby, hungry−looking man, who might be forty by the look of him. He stared vacantly at me for a few seconds, and then hurriedly led the way, holding his link high over his head.

This trouble over, another began, which put me in a towering rage. A gaudy young gentleman bumped into me and, though it was clearly his fault, I apologized and passed on, leaving him hopping about on one foot and nursing the other, which I had trodden on. He swore at me worse than a boatswain at a lubber, and but for the exquisite pain I had caused him I should have gone into the matter with him. I found my linkman leaning against a post and laughing heartily.

“Never you mind, sir. He'll not take the wall of you again in a hurry.”

“Take the wall?” I said.

“Done on purpose, sir, to pick a quarrel with you. The young sparks do it for a game.”

Not much farther on, we met a sedan, with an elegant young lady in it, and an elegant gentleman walking along by her close up to the chains, she being in the roadway. There was ample room for me to pass between him and the wall, which was also the courteous thing to do; but as soon as my linkman had passed him, he shot clean in my way. I gave him all the wall he wanted and more, bumping his head against it till he apologized humbly through his rattling teeth. The lady shrieked viciously at me, and one of her chairmen, my back being turned, pulled out his pole and came to attack me. My man, however, very dexterously pushed the link in his face as he was straddling over the chains, and he dropped the pole and spat and spluttered tremendously. I stepped across to the lady and apologized for detaining her, and then my man and I went on, easy victors.

Arrived at Queen Anne's Gate, another surprise awaited me. Master Freake's windows were ablaze with light, and the door was being held open by a man in handsome livery to admit an exquisite gentleman and a more exquisite lady who had just arrived there in chairs. I gave my man his guinea, and after dousing his link in a great iron extinguisher at the side of the door, he sped happily away. After watching the arrival of three or four more chairs and one carriage, I summoned up all my resolution and gave a feeble rat−tat with the massive iron lion's−head which served as knocker.

The man in livery opened to me, and I was inside before he could observe that I was an intruder. True, I was in my best clothes—my Sunday clothes, as I should have called them at home—and they were none so bad; but they had been made in Boston, where fashions ranged on the sober side. Here I looked like a sparrow in a flight of

bull−finches.

"Can I see Master Freake?" said I.

"No," said he, with uncompromising promptness.

"Is he at home?"

"No," he retorted.

"This is his house, I think?"

"It is," he assented.

"Then I suppose all these people are coming to see you—and cook," said I gravely.

The sarcasm might have got through his thick skin perhaps but for the intervention of another liveried gentleman, who briefly asserted that I was "off my head," and proposed a muster of forces to throw me out. My own feeling distinctly was that I was on my head, not off it; but his suggestion interested me, as I do not take readily to being thrown out of anything or anywhere. Luckily, a fresh arrival took their attention off me for a minute or two, and while I was standing aside to admire the lady, who should come statelily down the grand staircase into the hall but Dot Gibson. He too was in livery, but of a grave, genteel sort.

"Hello, Dot," said I, accosting him quietly.

It bounced all the gravity out of him. He shook my outstretched hand vigorously, and then apologized for doing so, saying he was so glad to see me. "Jorkins, you great ass," cried he to the first servant, "what do you mean by keeping his honour waiting?"

Jorkins looked apprehensively at Dot and the suggester of violence looked apprehensively at Jorkins; but Dot was too full to bother with them, and went on: "Mr. Freake will be delighted, sir, and so will Miss Waynflete. They're always talking of you. Come along, sir! Allow me to precede you."

He took me upstairs into the library, and left me there alone. In a few seconds Master Freake burst in on me.

"My dear lad," he cried, wringing my hand heartily, "welcome—a thousand times welcome!"

"Thank you, sir. I'm glad to be back," was all I could say.

He put a hand on each shoulder and stood at arm's length to examine me.

"And we're glad to have you back, looking as fit and brown as a bronze gladiator. Come along to your room! It's been ready for you this three months, for that silly Margaret set to work on it the very day we sent off your letter."

"How is Mistress Waynflete, sir?"

"You'll see in five minutes if you'll only bestir yourself. The wits say that there's no need for George to furnish the town with a new queen as I have provided it with an empress."

He hurried me off to my room, as he called it, and it was so grand that I crept about it on tiptoe for fear of damaging something. There was everything a young man could want except clothes, and Master Freake laughingly assured me that they (meaning Margaret and himself) had puzzled for hours to see if they could manage them, but had given it up in despair.

"I declared you'd pine and get thin," he said, "and she vowed you'd get lazy and fat."

I felt very doltish and unready as I followed him to the drawing−room. It was very clear to me that no meeting on level terms was in front of me, and when I got into a large, brilliant room where some dozen splendid ladies and as many elegant, easy−mannered gentlemen were assembled, I felt inclined to turn tail.

"Empress." It was the exact word. Master Freake put his arm in mine and led me towards her. She was sitting throned in one corner of a roomy, cushioned sofa, with half a dozen young men—the least of them an earl, I thought bitterly—bending round her as the brethren's sheaves bent round Joseph's. And, as if she were not overpowering enough of herself, everything that consummate skill and the nicest artistry could do to enhance her beauty had been done. Juno banqueting with the gods had not looked more superb. "On level terms," I whispered to myself mockingly, as Master Freake led me on, for one of the circling sheaves, with whom she was exchanging easy, lightsome banter, was my finely chiselled acquaintance, the Marquess of Tiverton.

Except that she cut a quip in two when she saw who it was that Master Freake was bringing, Margaret gave no sign of surprise. She neither paled nor reddened, nor gushed nor faltered. Empress−like she simply added me to her train.

"I bring you an old friend, Margaret," said Master Freake, for whom, as I saw, the worshippers round the idol made way respectfully.

“And my old friend is very welcome, sir,” she answered, holding out her hand. I bowed over it and kissed it. I thought that it trembled a little as it lay in mine, but it is at least probable that I was the source of what fluttering there was.

“I trust you have had a good voyage, Mr. Wheatman?” she questioned easily.

“Excellent, madam,” I replied, with imitative lightness of tone. “It was like rowing on a river.”

For a moment her eyes steadied and darkened, then she said with a smile, “That being so, even I, who am no sailor, should have enjoyed it along with you.”

This was how we met. Whether on level terms or not, who shall decide?

“I say, Mr. Wheatman,” broke in the pleasant voice of the Marquess, “you don't happen to have any venison−pasty on you, I suppose? I've got some rattling good snuff, and I'll give you a pinch for a plateful, as I did up in Staffordshire. I vow, Miss Waynflete, it makes me hungry to see him.”

This speech caused much laughter, and Margaret said it was fortunate supper was ready. She then introduced me to the company around, and when this was done, Master Freake fetched me to renew the acquaintance of Sir James Blount and his lady, so that I was soon full of talk and merriment.

Supper and talk, wine and talk, basset and talk—so the time went by till long after midnight. Then one by one the guests dropped off. The Marquess lingered longest, and on going, pledged me to call on him next morning.

“At last,” said Margaret. “Beauty sleep is out of the question to−night, Oliver, so tell us everything about everything. It's glorious to have you back.”

It is not my purpose to dwell on my life in London. After a few days it became one long agony because of, but not by means of, Margaret. She did her best for me, and was all patience, kindness, and graciousness, and was plainly bent on living on level terms with me according to her promise and prophecy. It only required a day or two to show me that she had many a man of rank and wealth in thrall. As wealth went then, the Marquess of Tiverton was, by his own fault and foolishness, a poorish man, but he was lost in love of her, and he was only one of the many exquisites who were for ever in and out of Master Freake's fine mansion. It did not become a Wheatman of the Hanyards to cringe or be abashed in any company, and with the best of them I kept on terms of ease and intimacy. I dressed as well, and perchance looked as well, as they did, and if my accomplishments differed from theirs they differed for the better in Margaret's eyes, which were the only eyes that mattered.

Brief as I intend to be, I must set down a few jottings on things that belong to the texture of my story. To begin with, the Colonel, though pardoned, was still in France, looking after his affairs there, for before starting to join the Prince he had wisely shifted all his fortune over to Paris.

Davie Ogilvie had got clear away after Culloden, and his sweet Ishbel, though taken after the battle, had been permitted to join him there. It was a great comfort to know they were safe, for there were sad relics of my escapade in London—the row of ghastly, grinning heads over Temple Bar.

Soon after my arrival, Master Freake had sent for his lawyers and delivered to me in full possession the Upper Hanyards and the huge tale of guineas which the rascal old earl had disgorged as the price of the letter. Master Freake kept a rigid silence over the contents of that famous document “about lands,” and I had no wish to know. It was worth a thousand acres and near ten thousand guineas to the Earl. I was satisfied if he was. I put my guineas in a bank of Master Freake's choosing. What a dowry I could have given Kate if—

My Lord Brocton was in town. I saw him several times, in the street or at the play, but took no notice of him. He was said to be eagerly hunting after a lady of meagre attractions but enormous fortune. Twice when I saw him he had with him the fellow I had bumped against the wall, a notorious shark and swashbuckler, by name and rank Sir Patrick Gee. Tiverton, who had his own reasons for being interested in Brocton, told me they were hand and glove together.

In a little while a month may be, a change came over the relation in which Margaret and I stood to each other. We both fought against it but in vain. We could not travel on parallel lines, we two. We must either converge or diverge, and fate had given me no choice.

I used to pretend I was going out, to ride or lounge with the Marquess or some other acquaintance, and then slip upstairs to the quiet old library, bury myself in a windowed recess cut off by curtains, and try to forget it all in a book. Fool−like I thought I could solve my problem so. The Hanyards was calling me and I dared not go. I should leave Margaret, and I could not leave her.

Why, I asked myself a thousand times, was I so poor a cur compared with Donald? He had done what I had

done, and he had seen his way at once and followed it. He would not live, having, in all innocence and with the most urgent of all reasons, killed his friend. Not that I felt that his solution was my solution. My duty was to leave Margaret and to go to Kate, to help her, to the best of my ability, to live down her sorrow, and to show by my life and conduct that I would pay the price. And here I was, hovering moth−like round the flame.

Then again I would say that I would wait till the inevitable had happened, and Margaret was married to Tiverton. Anything to put it off, that was really all I was capable of.

To me, in my recess, Margaret came one morning.

“I thought you'd gone out, Oliver,” she began.

“No,” said I. “I altered my mind, and thought I'd like reading better.”

“You puzzle me. Are you quite well?”

“As fit as a fiddle,” said I cheerily, and rose to give her my seat, for the recess would only hold one.

“You're not to move, sir.”

She fetched a couple of cushions, flung them by the window, and curled up on them. I wished she wouldn't, for she made a glorious picture.

“Now, sir, I am going to have it out with you,” she said severely and smilingly. I smiled back, and pulled myself together.

“I hope 'it' is not a very serious 'it,' madam,” I replied.

“It may be. Does your head ever trouble you?”

“My head ever trouble me?” I gasped, taken aback.

“Yes, your head, sir. When you fell down those stairs you received a very serious wound on the head. It gaped open so that I could have laid a finger in the hole. Are you sure it doesn't trouble you, Oliver? Blows on the head are dreadful things, you know.”

“Look at it,” said I, popping my head down, and very glad of the chance.

Her beautiful fingers parted my thick, short, bristly hair and found the spot.

“There's nothing wrong with the skull, is there?” I asked.

“No,” very doubtfully. “It's healed splendidly.”

“Now, madam,” said I, “talk to me in Italian!”

It was the first time, by chance, that I had thought of it.

For ten minutes she questioned and cross−questioned me in Italian on all sorts of subjects, and I came out of the ordeal pretty well—thanks to Signor Zandra.

“Point one,” said I in English. “The outside of my head is all right. Point two: are you satisfied with the inside?”

For a full minute she gazed in silence at her feet, twisting them about swiftly and somewhat forgetfully. It was trying, almost merciless, for she was very beautiful.

“Yes,” she said at length, but without looking at me. “You've done marvellously well.”

“In the only language one can love in,” I said bitterly.

The words had no apparent effect. She still stared at her twinkling feet. Suddenly she lifted her eyes up to mine and said, almost sharply, “Then what did happen to you between the Hanyards and Leek to change you?”

It was clean, swift hitting, and made me gasp, but I managed to escape.

“Madam,” said I, “I set out with you from the Hanyards to serve you and for no other purpose whatsoever. In my opinion, speaking in all modesty, I served you as well after Leek as before it. At least, I tried to.”

She leaped up, and, with great sweeps of her arm, flung the cushions into the library. She said briefly, “And you succeeded, sir!” Then she left me. swiftly and passionately, without another word or look.

After this, the gap between us became obvious.

Meanwhile the Marquess of Tiverton was doing his best to give me a competent knowledge of the Court−end of the town. He had a spacious mansion in Bloomsbury Square, but this was now let to a great nabob, and he himself lived in close−shorn splendour in a small house in St. James's. Here I saw much of him, for commonly I would stroll round late in the forenoon and rout him out of bed. By an odd turn we took to each other greatly, and while he drank chocolate in bed or trifled with his breakfast we had many talks on the few subjects that mattered to him.

Our favourite theme was Margaret, whom he outspokenly worshipped. He rhapsodized over her in great

stretches, calling me to testify with him to her divineness, and rating me soundly if, in the bitterness of my heart, I was a little laggard in my devotions. And, at irregular intervals, like Selah in the Psalms, he would intone dolefully, “And I can't marry her!”

It was no use my protesting that an unmarried man could marry any woman he liked if she would have him.

“A man can,” he would reply, “but a bankrupt marquess can't. I've got to marry that jade. Pah! She's as lank as a hop−pole and as yellow as a guinea. But what's a marquess to do, Noll? They say she could tie up the neck and armholes of her shift and fill it with diamonds. Damn her! I wish Brocton would snap her up, but he can't. He'll never be more than an earl and I'm a marquess. Curse my luck! Fancy me a marquess! I'm a disgrace to my order and as poor as a crow.”

The 'jade' referred to was the nabob's only daughter and heiress, who was, as all the town knew, to make a great match. My Lord Brocton was keenly in pursuit of her, but she inclined to the Marquess, who could have had her and her vast fortune any day for the asking. She was certainly not overdone with charms, but Tiverton in his anger had made her out worse than she was.

The morning after my encounter with Margaret in the recess, Tiverton was more than usually talkative, the fact being not unconnected, I imagine, with an unsuccessful bout at White's the night previous. We got through our usual talk about Margaret and the nabobess, and then he struck out a new line.

“Now if the divine Margaret,” he said, “rightly so named as the pearl of great price among women, were only Freake's daughter and heiress, I'd be on my knees before her in a jiffy. They say he made cartfuls of money over that Jacobite business. Everybody here was selling at any price the stocks would fetch, and he was buying right and left on his own terms. He was back here, knowing of the retreat from Derby, over twenty−four hours before the courier came, and the old fox kept the news to himself. He's the first man out of the city to set up house in the Court−end. Old Borrowdell shifted his tabernacle as far west as Hatton Gardens in my father's time, and that was thought pretty big and bold, but here's Freake right in the thick of it, and holds his own like a lion among jackals. Fact is, he's a right−down good fellow. Being a marquess, I ought to despise him, 'stead of which I feel like a worm whenever he comes near me, and that, mark ye, Noll, not because I owe him close on ten thousand. I used to owe a rascal named Blayton quite as much, and every time he came whining round here I either wanted to kick him out or did it. Heigh−ho! I'm in the very devil of a mess but I'll cheat scraggy−neck yet. I'll reform outright, Noll. I'll never touch a card again as long as I live.”

“That's the talk!” said I heartily. “Eat something and let's have the horses out for a gallop across Putney Heath.”

Next evening, early, being very miserable, I went round to the Blounts, with whom I was very friendly. I forgot myself for a time, it being impossible to think of anything while lying on my back on the hearth, with baby Blount trying to pull my hair out by the roots and cutting a stubborn tooth on my nose. He was a delightful, pitiless, young rascal and would leave anything and anybody to maul me about.

I had, however, for once mistaken my billet, for while thus engaged who should come in with his mother but Margaret?

“Aren't you afraid to trust baby with such an inexperienced nurse?” asked Margaret, smiling at my discomfiture, for I had to lie there till I was rescued from the young dog's clutches.

“Not at all. When he's with a baby, he becomes a baby, which is what they want. He'll make an ideal father, don't you think?” said her ladyship happily.

“I think he will,” said Margaret in a very judicial tone, but she coloured as she said it.

While Lady Blount disposed of baby, Margaret beckoned me aside. “Oliver, you'll do me a favour, won't you?” she asked.

“Certainly,” said I.

“As I came here in a chair, I saw the Marquess going into White's. I fear he may be gambling again. He easily yields to the temptation, and soon becomes reckless. Will you call in, as if by chance, and coax him out? I would have him saved from himself, and you have great influence over him.”

“If he won't come out,” said I, smiling, “I'll lug him out!”

I excused myself to Lady Blount and set forth on my errand, willingly enough, since she desired it and I liked him, but all the way I thought of her anxious face as she asked me.

At White's I found Tiverton playing piquet with Brocton. A heap of guineas was by his side, and he was

flushed and excited with success. The bout had attracted some attention, for the stakes were running high, and eight or nine men were gathered round the players, among them Sir Patrick Gee. I waited while the hand was played out. Tiverton repiqued his opponent, and joyously raked over to his side of the table four tall piles of guineas.

It was my first meeting with Brocton. Chance and Margaret had brought us together again.

"Egad, Tiverton," said I to the Marquess, who now first observed me, "you had the cards that time with a vengeance. Are you playing on? What about your engagement with me?"

The Marquess coloured slightly at my veiled rebuke. He looked doubtfully at his watch, then at me, and finally at Brocton.

"Have you had enough?" he asked.

"Enough?" cried Brocton. "Since you took up with farmers you've got chicken−hearted at cards. Play on, my lord!"

"I have told you," said I quietly to Brocton, "that his lordship has an engagement with me. That should be enough. If you want your revenge, which is natural, there are other nights available."

"I want my revenge now, and will have it," he said meaningly, "and this is how I serve men who come between me and my revenge." He was shuffling a pack of cards as he spoke, and, with the words, he flung them in my face.

At most of the tables play stopped, and the players there became silently intent on this new game where the stakes ran highest of all. It meant a fight, a fight between an expert swordsman and a man who knew nothing of the craft. To such a fight there could be but one end.

Tiverton was beside himself. "She'll never forgive me!" he muttered, and I looked amusedly at him and whispered, "Who? The nabobess?"

He was the highest in rank there, and as such a court of appeal and a sort of master of the ceremonies.

"My Lord Tiverton," said I aloud, "I am, as you know, a recent arrival in town from the Americas and other outlandish places, and, naturally enough under these circumstances, I am not clear on some points."

"It's clear you've been swiped across the face," broke in Sir Patrick Gee.

"Hold your tongue, sir!" said Tiverton, looking quietly at him. "Proceed, Mr. Wheatman!"

It made me smile again, tight as the corner was, to see the play−acting spirit creeping over him. He was beginning to enjoy himself.

"Therefore, my lord, I should like to ask you a few questions," I continued.

"Certainly, sir," he replied, with great impressiveness, taking snuff in great style while he awaited my questioning.

"Is there any doubt that I am the insulted person?"

"None whatever," he replied. "My Lord Brocton insulted you wantonly and deliberately."

"Then, my lord Marquess, I may be wrong, but I think I have the right of choosing the place, the time, and the weapons."

"Certainly, Mr. Wheatman," he answered.

"Then if I choose to say, 'On the banks of the Susquehanna, ten years hence, with tomahawks,' so it must be?"

A wave of scornful laughter went round the room as the question passed from mouth to mouth. Even the most ardent gamblers left their play to join the circle around us. English even in their vices, they took a fight for granted, but were up in a moment to see some fun.

The Marquess was disconcerted. He obviously felt that I was about to reflect on him in the gravest way; that, in short, I was backing out. He would be tarnished by the dishonour that had driven me out of the world of gentlemen.

"I think," said he, "that would be overstraining the privileges of an insulted gentleman."

"Run away, farmer!" bellowed Sir Patrick raucously.

Tiverton looked disdainfully at him. "You may like to know, my lords and gentlemen," he said, as grandly as if he were reciting a set piece from the stage, "that on the night of his arrival from Boston my friend was rudely insulted in the Strand by a certain person." Here he stopped, whirled round on the hulking scoundrel, and added grimly to him, "I shall finish the story unless you leave the room at once."

Gee thought better of it and slipped off like a disturbed night−prowler.

"Thank you, my lord," said I very humbly, "for your decision. I hope my unavoidable ignorance entitles me to try again."

"Certainly," said he, but with unmistakable uncertainty.

I looked round the intent curious circle of faces and then at Brocton. On his face and in his cruel eyes there were the same gloating anticipations that were there when, in Marry−me−quick's cottage, he thought he was bending Margaret to his foul will. You could have heard a card drop in that crowded room.

My time had come to the tick. Stretching myself taut, I said slowly and distinctly, "Here. Now. Fists."

Brocton went limp and ghastly. I strode up to him, took him, unresisted, by the scruff of the neck, and then said curtly, "Open the door, Tiverton."

The willing little Marquess ran delightedly to do my bidding, and I kicked my lord Brocton into the kennel and out of my life.

Next morning I went round to Tiverton's as usual, and while he was at breakfast, and we were starting our usual round of talk, in came Sir James Blount, a stranger at such an hour.

"Have you heard the news?" he asked abruptly.

"What news?" asked Tiverton, rather sour at being cheated out of his morning's consolatory grumble with me.

"Mr. Freake has declared that Miss Waynflete is to be his sole heiress," he replied.

I had to thump Tiverton to prevent him being choked by something that went the wrong way. We had an excited talk about the news, which Sir James had received direct from Master Freake, which settled it as a fact beyond dispute or change. Margaret was now the most desirable match in London from every point of view. Blount went away quite pleased with the stir he had made.

"Henry! Henry!" yelled Tiverton as soon as we were alone, and in came his man hastily. "Henry! What the devil do you mean by putting me into these old rags? Damme! I look like a chairman. Go and get some decent things out, you old rascal! I'm to call on the greatest lady in London town."

He hurried off after his servant, and I heard him singing and shouting over his second toilet. I crept miserably out of the house and made my way to the mews. The ostler saddled my horse, a beautiful chestnut mare which Master Freake had given me, and I rode out of town, deep in thought. Mechanically, I went the way we had intended to go, and found myself at last on the heights that overlook London from the north. Then I pulled up.

The towers of the Abbey stood out nobly against the steel−blue sky. Within their shadow was Master Freake's house where, by now, Tiverton would not have pleaded his love in vain. I saw her there, in the splendid room she always dimmed with her greater splendour, the exquisite Marquess at her feet, happy in possession of the pearl of great price. Over this vision a shadow came, and I saw the house−place at the Hanyards, with our widowed Kate alone in her sorrow. Her flame−red hair was white as snow and tears of blood were on her cheeks. Donald's farewell, *Weird mun hae way*, boomed in my ears like a dirge. With a sigh that was near of kin to a sob, I pulled the mare round and urged her northwards, northwards and homewards.

In my fear and trembling I shirked everything, doing childishly and more than childishly. I was not on Sultan, and when I rode out of Lichfield I hugged that simple fact to my heart. So much of my dream had at least not come true, and I gave the lie to more of it by leaving the high road and wandering devious ways till, within four or five miles of home, I left even the by−ways and kept to the fields. So keen was I on my little stratagems that I rode over the Upper Hanyards without once recalling the fact that it was now mine as it had been my father's before me. About four o'clock on a December day, just over a year since leaving home, I leaped the mare over a hedge and was at the old gate.

More of the dream was untrue. The winter sun was dropping down to the hill−tops like a great carbuncle set in gold, and the Hanyards was all aglow in its flaming rays. The gate was open, so that I could at least begin by pitching into Joe Braggs for his negligence, and the windows of the house−place shimmered a welcome because of the cheerful blaze within.

Not a soul stirred. I jumped down, threw the reins over the gate−post, and walked stealthily into the yard and up to the window. Still not a soul stirred.

I peeped in.

There was our Kate, leaning lovingly over my chair, pillowed as she had never pillowed it for me, and in the chair was clearly a man, for I could see his stockings and breeches stretching comfortably past her skirts. She laughed merrily at something said, and then stooped and kissed the person in the chair.

This was woman's faith! With a great clatter, I strode into the porch, thrust open the door, and stepped in. There was a shout of delight, a babble of, “It's our Noll! It's our Noll!” and Kate leaped into my arms and rained kisses on me.

The man followed her, slowly and feebly, leaning heavily on a stick. When he turned his face so that the firelight showed him up, my legs sank beneath me and my knees knocked together. It was Jack, dear old Jack, nothing but the shadow of himself, but still Jack right enough, and his hand was in mine.

“Run, Kit!” he cried. “Get some wine! The lad's overcome. God bless you, old Noll, how are you?”

Kate ran off into the parlour, where our wine was stored.

“Jack!”

“Hello, Noll!”

“I thought I'd killed you.”

“Was it you?” he asked, all amazed at my self−accusation.

“Yes,” I faltered.

“By gom, Noll, you did give me a sock!”

He heard Kate tripping back with the wine, and put his finger on his lips for a warning. And that was the first and last remark Jack Dobson made on the subject.

CHAPTER XXVI. THE WAY OF A MAID WITH A MAN

It took me to cure Jack. I administered one dose of medicine and he at once began to fill out and get strong and chesty in a manner almost absurd, whereon there was much twitting of our Kate who, in her old way, rated me soundly in public and crept up to me in private, and kissed me and wept gladly in the most approved maiden−like style.

This was the way of it. I sent Joe Braggs into Stafford the day after I got home to fetch out Master Dobson, and had him alone in my room. True he was as near and grasping as ever, but I saw even this side of him in a new light now, for he had been near and grasping for Jack. He was rather uncertain when we met; glad enough, of course, to see an old friend back again safe and sound, but dubious on the main point.

“Master Dobson,” said I, “your Jack desires to wed our Kate.”

“So he tells me,” said he dolefully, rubbing his thin finger under the edge of his bob−wig to scratch his perplexed head.

“She is an excellent young woman, and a comely,” said I, grinning at him.

“Undoubtedly,” he conceded.

“But, as the head of the family, Master Dobson, I offer no objection to the proposal.” Much it would have mattered if I had, but I always take credit when and while I can.

“It's very kind of you, Ol ... Mr. Wheatman,” said he, “but....”

“Yes,” said I encouragingly.

“But there's what I may call the material side of the matter to be considered. My son's bride should be suitable from the business point of view.”

“I've been considering that point, Master Dobson. It is undoubtedly important. Jack's a careless young dog, and I'm sure our Kate is just the woman he wants from a business point of view. She'll keep an eye on every meg in his pockets.”

“Tut, tut!” said he, stirred to action, as I knew he would be. “You mistake me completely. My son will not be wanting in this world's gear and he must have a wife to match.”

“I see,” said I. “One with something substantial in her pocket.”

“Precisely,” said he.

“Well, Master Dobson, if our Kate is willing to marry your Jack, a point on which I can offer only a conjecture, she will marry him with five thousand pound in her pocket.”

He sat bolt upright and stared at me with his mouth wide open.

We fetched them in, mother coming with them, and the old man there and then gave them his blessing. Kate ran into mother's arms, while Jack wrung my hand and danced for joy. Afterwards he ate the most astonishing dinner imaginable, loudly asseverating that he was as right as nine−pence and sick of slops.

My coming back made a great noise all over our countryside. Of what I had actually done there was no knowledge whatsoever. The tale went that I had been to America and found a goldmine, and come home and bought back the lost Hanyards. Acute sceptics in barbers' shops and market ordinaries advanced the opinion that it must have been a very little goldmine, but they were unable to substitute any other explanation and so fell into contempt. The tale suited me and I never contradicted it. In a world where a man who has travelled to London is a person of consideration and renown, I, who had been to America, was as a god. My first visit to Stafford put the sleepy old town into commotion.

Every night around the fire in the house−place I told them of my adventures. Jack, the sly fox, sat among his cushions, which he had not been fool enough to discard along with his slops, with Kate on a low stool at his knees. The vicar sat by mother's side on the settle. I drew a chair close to her, so that her hand could clasp mine as I talked, and very helpful I found it, for she understood in silence and in silence comforted me. Jane laid supper, taking a long time over it, for between journeys to and from the kitchen she would stand behind the settle and listen wide−eyed to a spell of my talk. Every night the vicar said grace, adding, in his simple, apostolic way, a special thanksgiving to the good God who had brought the young lad safe home again, through perils by sea and perils by land, and out of the very hands of evil men who had compassed him about to destroy him. Then, after

supper, I escorted the good man home and came back through the moonlit lanes; and every night, without fail, I went and stood on the very spot where the gaff had slipped out of my collar, and I had turned round to see Margaret.

The only discontented person in our little circle was Joe Braggs, who had caught the dace that caught the jack, and so started me out of my jog−trot yeoman's round into the great world of life and adventure. Joe had done well while I had been away; our fields had yielded fruitfully under his care as bailiff; and, having had a favourable harvest, we were much money in hand on the year's working. I had thanked him heartily, confirmed him as my bailiff now that I was back, and given him fifty guineas, a sum which to him was wealth untold. Still the rascal was not satisfied, and went about with a bear on his back, as Jane had it, so that I was greatly tempted to clip his ear for him.

The day before Christmas, he was busy all morning under Jane's garrulous command, getting in bunches of holly and other evergreens from the hedgerows. His last journey had been to one of the farms on the Upper Hanyards in quest of mistletoe, which grew abundantly there in an ancient orchard. On getting back he had held a sprig over Jane's head for a certain familiar and laudable purpose, and had been rewarded with a smack that sounded like the dropping of an empty milk−pail. A little later I found him glowering in a cowhouse, and had it out with him.

“Look here, Joe, my lad,” said I, “tell me straight what's the matter with you or I'll break your head.”

“What d'ye want to come back 'ere for, upsettin' Jin like this'n?” he blurted.

“What the blazes have I done to upset Jin?” I asked.

“Why didna y' bring 'er back wi' ye, then?”

“Who's her, you jolt−head?” I demanded angrily.

“That leddy o' yourn. Jin's that upset 'er wunna luk at me, an' we wor gettin' on fine.”

It was no use talking to Joe. I explained that she was a great lady and was to marry a marquess, that is a much more important person than an earl. He knew what an earl was, for of course he had heard of the 'Yurl,' meaning that old rascal Ridgeley. A marquess, however, was outside his ken, and the information was wasted.

“Why didna y' marry 'er y'rsel', Master Noll, and bring 'er back 'ere, then Jin wud 'a' bin all rate?”

“I couldn't,” said I.

“Did y' ask 'er?”

“No.”

“More fule yow,” said he bitterly. “She'd 'a' 'ad y', rate enough. Jin says so, an' 'er knows.”

What could be done with such a silly fellow? I left off discussing and took him indoors with me. In front of Jane I pledged him in a mug of ale and told him he was one of the best lads breathing, and I was greatly beholden to him. In front of him I kissed Jane under the mistletoe and told her that, bonny lass as she was, she was lucky to have the best lad in Staffordshire. I left them in the kitchen, and heard no more crashes. Later on, Joe whistled his three tunes with admirable skill and intolerable persistency while, under Jane's orders, he took in charge the boiling of the Christmas puddings in a vast iron pot hung over the kitchen fire.

It was growing dark. Everybody was happy. Mother was out and round the village with her Christmas gifts, attended by one of our men and a cart packed with good things. Nothing could have made her happier. Jack and Kate were in the house−place busy with all sorts of housewiferies, in which he was as interested as she. Joe and Jane were in the kitchen, as merry as grigs. I went into my own room, across the passage from the parlour, sacrosanct to me, my books and my belongings.

There, too, was the great jack, set up to the very life by the skilful hand of Master Whatcot. He appeared to be cleaving a bunch of reeds to pounce on a dace, just as he had done once too often on that memorable day. Brothers of the angle had made pilgrimages to see him from thirty miles round, and it was an added charm to fancy that the monster had been caught in a spot where Izaak Walton had fished as a boy, he having been born and bred in these parts. My jack is a famous jack, for the curious reader will find an account of him, with his dimensions and catching weight exactly given, in Master Joshua Spindler's folio volume entitled “Rudimenta Piscatoria, or the Whole Art of Angling set forth in a Series of Letters from a Nobleman to his Son,” London, 1751. No one who has yet seen him has seen a bigger, though most of them have heard of one.

I lit my candles, got my pipe going, and drew my chair near the fire to read and smoke. It was, however, early days yet for me to read for long. Moreover, by habit I had picked up my Virgil, and it was as yet impossible for

me to feel the tips of my fingers in the teeth−marks without thinking of the poor wretch who had made them. I could see in exactest detail his dead body lying in the road and Swift Nicks beside it, pitching the bag of guineas up and down in the air, and smiling gleefully and yet wistfully at me. From that grim event, whether my mind travelled backwards or forwards, it traversed scenes such as few men are privileged, or fated, to pass through.

It was, again, too soon for me to realize the full effect of my experiences on myself. I was not moody, as in the days aforetime. I neither loathed my lot nor cursed my destiny. I had seen warfare and bloodshed, I had had my heart wrung and my nerves racked, and now the peaceful meadows winding along the river and stretching up to the purple hills were dear to eyes from which the scales had fallen. This was the life and labour on which the world was based, and it was worthy of any man. I had seen Death the Harvester at work, and he was a less alluring figure than Joe Braggs with a flashing sickle in his hand and a swathe of golden grain under his arm.

I should never be really alone again. I had company of which I should never tire as I sat here with my memories. Margaret was rarely absent from my mind, and every memory of her was a blessing and an inspiration. I did not regret my love, foolish and vain as it had been. The thing that really mattered was that Jack was alive. I could now look back on everything without bitterness. If Margaret came for me now, to call me forth to another hard round of struggle and adventure, I should be off with her like a shot. She had made a splendid companion. She would make a splendid marchioness. Some day, when the pain would not be unendurable, I would go to London and steal another peep at those matchless eyes and that tower of golden, gleaming hair.

I did not hear the door open, but I heard mother's calm voice, gently reproving Jane for an unseemly giggle. A pair of arms crept round my neck, and slim white fingers cupped my chin. Kate did not know that it was I who had so nearly sent her sweetheart to an untimely grave, for Jack had sternly forbidden me to mention the subject to anyone, and, as I have said, it might never have happened so far as he was concerned. Therefore Kate, always a loving and attentive sister, was now more loving and attentive than ever because she knew in her heart that, though I had gained much in my wanderings, I had lost the one thing she had found in the quiet sickroom where, during long weary months, she had lured Jack back to life. It was always her task to fetch me from my books and my thoughts to the beloved circle in the house−place, when, as now, she had prepared a dish of tea for us.

The soft resolute hands raised my chin, and I gasped as I looked into Margaret's eyes.

She lightly held me down, and, as if we had only parted five minutes before in the house−place, began to speak, quietly but rapidly.

“Oliver, do you remember waking me in the barn?”

I nodded. I was too amazed to speak, and there was that in her eyes which made me tremble.

“I was dreaming,” she said, and I nodded again and remembered how she had flushed like the dawn.

“Because you are the greatest goose of a man that ever lived, I am going to tell you my dream. I dreamed that you were carrying me across the Pearl Brook, and as you carried me the brook got wider and wider—you had made it as wide as you could, you know—until it seemed as if we should never get across it. And you would not put me down, though I begged you to do so, but carried me on and on. You grew tired and weary, and your face went white and drawn, as I find it now, but you would not let me go. Was it not a curious dream, Oliver?”

Again I nodded.

“Why can't you speak, Oliver? Anything would make it less hard. Then, because you were so weary, and so good to me, and so faithful, and long−enduring, I did in my dream ... in my dream, you mark ... something very un−maidenly ... and immediately we were both on the other side; and I awoke as you put me down at last and found you by my side, having, in your knightly unselfishness, ruined your hat to give me a drink of milk. And because you are the best man on earth, and also a blind silly goose, Oliver, and I must take some risk or lose my all, I am going ... to do the unmaidenly thing I did in my dream ... and ... you ... must not misjudge me, Oliver.”

She stopped, smiled as only Margaret can, and bent her head until a loose coil of amber hair fell on my face Then she brushed it aside and, after a little gasping cry, kissed me on the lips.

EPILOGUE. THE LITTLE JACK

AT THE HANYARDS STAFFORDSHIRE *August 9th, 1757*

Margaret and I had a hot dispute this morning. True she went away, singing happily, to rebuild the masses of yellow hair that had fallen all over her shoulders and mine, for the dreadful stuff seems to tumble down if I look at it, but still we had disputed, and vigorously, too. The plain fact is she had sniffed at Aristotle.

The trouble arose out of this story of mine which I have been busy writing for the last twenty months. It has been hard work, for I was new to the business, and had to learn how to do it, but it has been a pleasant task and a labour of love. Now we disputed about it. I said it was finished. She said it wasn't. I said I ought to know. She replied not necessarily, since I was such a great goose. Then I loaded my big gun and thought to blow her clean out of the water.

"My dear Margaret," said I, "Aristotle lays it down that every work of art has a beginning, a middle, and an end. The beginning of our story was the catching of the great jack, the middle of it was the fight at the 'Red Bull,' and the end of it was the kiss you gave me. You see, dear, how exactly I have done what Aristotle says I ought to do."

"Bother Aristotle! What does he know about us?" It was here that she sniffed, not figuratively but actually. That is to say she held up her nose, on pretence of looking at me, and audibly ... well, sniffed. There's no other word for it. Then she cried triumphantly, "What is the use, Noll, of telling our story and not saying a single word about the most important people in it?"

To this question I made no reply. I was beaten. Aristotle, had he been in my place, would have been beaten too. If we had been in town I would have run round to Mr. Johnson's and asked him to assist me, but I feel sure he would have been as helpless as I was. There was no reply, so I contented myself with playing with her gorgeous hair till it was all a−tumble to the floor.

Bother Aristotle! I must do as Margaret bids.

* * * * *

The Colonel and Master Freake were in the house−place when, at last, that memorable Christmas Eve, I proudly took my Margaret there.

"Sir," said I to the former, before he had ceased his hearty handshake, "I love Margaret dearly and Margaret loves me. May we be married?"

"You young dog! What d'ye say to that, John?" he said.

"Nothing is nearer to my heart," said the great merchant of London, giving me his hand in turn.

"Nor to mine, so that settles it," cried the Colonel, fishing out his snuff−box, while I led Margaret up to mother.

We spent a happy Christmas as lovers, and were married on New Year's Day by the vicar.

Jack and Kate were married in the spring, by which time he was as well and strong as ever. For years I feared lest his severe wound should have left some permanent source of weakness, but happily my fears were ill−founded. Jack, having had enough of soldiering, took to business at Master Freake's suggestion. He has developed all his father's shrewdness while retaining all his own boyish charm. He is now Master Freake's right hand, in the great London house of Freake &Dobson. Kate is Kate still, ardent, busy, level−headed, and loving, and the happy mother of three girls and a boy. Jack and I are as twins to one another.

In the summer after our wedding, Margaret and I went our journey over again. We saw Cherry−Cheeks, and made sure that Sim should have not only a good wife but a good business of his own to keep her on. We found out sweet Nance Lousely, and filled her pinner full of guineas after all, and left her tearful and happy. We knelt together by a simple grave in the Catholic burial−ground at Leek, and on the top of Shap we stood, with tears in our eyes, beside the great stone that marked the resting−place of Donald and his chief.

I did become a Parliament man, as Master Faneuil had said I should, and am a strong supporter of Mr. Pitt. We spend part of each year in London, where the Marquess is our great friend. He married the nabobess after all, and she loved him well enough to make it her business to reform him. He vows she is the finest woman in England, with a head on her shoulders as good as Mr. Freake's. She makes a good marchioness, too, for she

always had sense, and has developed dignity.

But most of our time we spend at the Hanyards, which I have made into a fine house by careful changes. Master Joe Braggs and Mistress Jane Braggs are our loyal, willing servants and our friends, and are as happy as sandboys together. They have now quite a large family.

To−day we are all together again for a long stay at the Hanyards. The Archdeacon of Lichfield, once our beloved vicar, is with us, simple, fatherly, and learned as of old. I can see his white head when I lift mine up from my writing. He is sunning himself in the garden and talking with mother, who turns her eyes now and again to look at the road, for Kate and Jack are coming in from Stafford with their children.

All these are familiar names, but it is fit that the record should be given before I go back to Margaret's sniff at Aristotle. For while I was busying myself with her hair, who should come in sight, walking through the orchard from the river, but the Colonel and Master Freake. They stopped to join mother and the Archdeacon in their talk, and we, looking at them, were proud and happy in the knowledge of their love for us.

Then there was a great clatter and chattering and excited shouting without. Margaret had left the door of my study open, and in raced the most important people in our story. They had a tale too big for coherent talk, and they gabbled away, one after the other or both together, to tell us all about it.

It was Oliver who had done it. He held up with a pride that made him splutter a little jack about fourteen inches long, which he had just caught. They say he is his father over again. At any rate, he will fish morning, noon, and night, if he can coax one of us elders to go with him to take care of him.

There he stood, the fish dangling at arm's length, telling his mother exactly how he had done it. I do not pretend to be impartial, but a finer boy than mine is not to be found. He drops the fish to the floor to rush into his mother's arms to be kissed and praised.

I am busy, too; busy as I love best of all to be. For on my knee, her arms round my neck and her great mane of glorious wheat−coloured hair tickling my face, is the dearest little creature on God's earth, my other Margaret. If you want to see me when I am intensely proud and happy, you must see me with her at my side walking in the Park or down the Green Gate at Stafford, with all eyes turning on her because of her surpassing childish beauty.

“I helped him catch it, daddy,” she says, lifting up her face to be kissed.

So does history repeat itself, and it is settled at once that Noll's jack is to be put by Master Whatcot in the same case as dad's, for all the world to know that he is as good a fisherman as his father before him. Joe is to send it to Stafford at once, and the two rush off eagerly to give it to him, leaving us alone.

To the glowing beauty of her maidenhood Margaret has added the serene beauty of motherhood. That is all the change I can see in her, as I put my arms round her and draw her to me.

When she could speak she said happily, “Well done fisherman!”