

Or, The Last of Cromwell
A ROMANCE OF OLD EDINBURGH
CHAPTER VII.
RETURN AND MARRIAGE: LADY HOWESON'S SUSPICION—A WALK IN THE WOODS AND ITS RESULT.

"Tibbie, indeed!" cried Lady Howeson, in haughty reproach to her husband. "I'll thank ye, Sir John, to remember my title when ye address me—especially afore servants or inferiors," then glancing calmly towards the open casement at the handsome face of Carlo Hepburn, she added—
"Yes, it's the King—but what wonder that he should come back where he was so well entertained, especially when ye're a Knight and hee a bonnie daughter? Bless his bonnie face! he's 'nae mair'—least o' his nobles, and there's a sayin' what may happen yet. Marion, ye needna blush and hang yer head, for if ye withered spidder that we saw at Holyrood 'ere some o' the grand laddies that he sees, it's the wonder he wanders oot by to Cromrod."

Marion's heart almost stopped beating, and she could scarcely bairn her eyes as she gazed at the familiar face of Holyrood, though gracious and friendly, had been decidedly more dignified and less amorous than at Braeside. Now, however, by some strange freak of fate that was all changed, and her noble admirer stood up at the open window, bowing low and raising his eyes with an expression which comes with love and with nothing else. He seemed, indeed, to have eyes for none but her, and gazed and gazed till his blood tingled on her cheeks again. Laying down the lute he ran out, and courteously helped Marion down, while Sir John did the same to his wife, but got no thanks for his attention.

"Could ye no have let His Majesty help me doos, ye ill-mannered gowk," she whispered fiercely in Sir John's ear. "Kings are eye afore Knights, and I wanted to be able to say that the King helpt me doos oot o' my carriage. My man, I'll let ye hear about this after!" Then suddenly dispelling the frowns from her brow she turned sweetly to Hepburn and said, "Gude evening to your Majesty, ye did me a good service once, which I have never forgotten."

"Carlo Hepburn? It's no possible," cried Sir John, taking the proffered hand, but still in doubt. "Mas, I wadna have kent ye."

"Your Majesty may cheat my pur doiled husband w' your humorous pranks, but a woman has keener instincts," said Lady Howeson, with an air of superior penetration. "I've heard that ye can even yeal yeal' af for an auld caber-bunzie, and doo've even yer ain countenance."

"A gaberlunzie? That reminds me that I sent a written warning to ye, by the hands of an auld blugown," cried Hepburn. "Did the auld carle bring it in good faith and good time?"

"There was nae gaberlunzie here," said Sir John, "but your message was brought a' richt by the King himself."

"The King? Merciful powers! I could that old beggar then have been the King in disguise!" exclaimed Hepburn, with such genuine consternation that even Lady Howeson began to look at him in doubt.

"Very likely," responded Sir John. "Ood, sir, ye canna see anything that he like to set his mind to. He's as brave as he's gude too, for he defended my lassie there against Sir Lewis Burkill and three o' his hand-picked men and doobed them. That's a long story w' a maist surprising end, so come in by and hear it a'."

"Noo that I see ye richt, there is a difference," said Lady Howeson somewhat less effectively. "Ye're no quite sae gude looking as the King for a' thing, and—"

"Oh, mother, how can ye say so," exclaimed Marion with warmth, and then bustling to the templets at her own temerity.

"Nor sae tall or noble looking," critically continued Lady Howeson with a look of rebuke to her daughter.

"True, madam," laughingly returned Hepburn, "a golden crown aye aheads a lustre on the head and form beneath it which never glazes from a plain bonnet. Certain, ye had seen the King as I did, as an auld beggar, I doubt if ye would have seen muckle beauty about him, or as much as offered him a cog o' orwellie."

"Dod, I wad believe't!" cried Sir John emphatically.

"Of course—of course! a man maun aye believe anything against his ain wife!" cried Lady Howeson, by no means pleased with the remark "that the King is the King," as she said it, the King came here as a plain stranger, yet I kent a' the time he was the King. Nae-thing can escape woman's penetration."

Sir John coughed uneasily behind his hand, and bestowed on the stranger a warning wink, the meaning of which Hepburn was not slow to understand.

"But my dear madam," he gradually continued, again bowing low to Lady Howeson, "a man sets little store by his looks, and beauty is nothing to him, except when it takes the form of a lovely maiden like this," and again he cast a tender glance upon Marion, which certainly quickened the pulsations of her heart—"and proud am I to have been the means of warning her and you of the impending danger."

"Ood, I think he's bonnier than the King efter a'!" said Lady Howeson to her husband, charmed in the manner in which Hepburn had addressed her and smoothed off the little difficulty.

"A King couldna have handled her better," thought Sir John. "What wad I o' gie to hae sic a' head on my shoulders!"

"Will ye allow me, Mrs. Howeson, to conduct you into the house?" graciously continued Hepburn, offering her his arm in the identical manner of the King.

"Certainly, Sir," was the delighted response. "But I'm no' Mrs. Howeson now; my husband was knighted the day at Holyrood for saving the King's life last night in Cromrod Woods."

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