

LLANFAIR COURT.

CHAPTER I.

The sun was setting in a sea of glory behind the fir wood that surrounded Llanfair Court. The golden rays pierced the heavy foliage and caught the jagged pink trunks of the old trees, turning them into ruddy, flaming rods of every tone and shade. Shimmering through the branches the parting streams of sunlight fell across the broad terrace in front of the house, now touching the old stone parapet with jostling caresses and showering golden kisses upon its grey lichens, now lying in bright patches athwart the grass or gliding the breast of the swallow as he wheeled in the stream of fiery light.

Fervently along the terrace paced the master of the court and his daughter, Gwyneth, a tall, slim maiden of fourteen.

He gazed at the setting sun and smiled at its wondrous glory.

"This beautiful, this beautiful," he murmured; then his smile faded away and his face was overcast by some sad thought as he in the strong sunshine by a heavy cloud. Though not yet forty, his bearing was that of a man of many more years. He walked as one weighed down by some burden, wearily and pensively. His face, pale and handsome, was set off by the thick raven locks and the deep, flashing eyes, which lit up his entire countenance. A short beard, pointed as was the custom of gentlemen of the Elizabethan period, covered the chin and half hid the mouth. Some great sorrow seemed to hold him in its sway and had imprinted lines of care and anxiety on his high brow. Perhaps it was this that had traced that gentleness on his countenance and drew all children to him, and made his own daughter Gwyneth worship him with all the ardor of her being. It seemed to her that her father and mother were one, and that together round her heart and were inseparable. Her earliest recollections had been connected with her mother's death. She remembered lying in her father's arms that same night, and while he bent over her she first learned to know sorrow and to read in his face the written grief of a strong man. Since then trouble had always been with him, she thought. A staunch Catholic, her father had suffered many wrongs at the hands of the Queen's followers. The old place was going to ruin, for there was no money to keep it up. Only two servants remained; the others had been obliged to seek elsewhere the means of livelihood her father could no longer afford them. She alone was left to him; he was her all in all and she was his. And Richard—For a moment she had half forgotten the cousin who had called the old court his home.

"Dear old Dick," she murmured and then she sighed—why, she could not tell; but somehow things were not quite the same between herself and the brother-cousin, who had only lately returned from the city of London. He was just as fond of her that she was quite sure, and he loved Sir Rupert as much as she did. Where, then, was the difference? Where was the rift between them which with her quick perception she was conscious of? Far away deep down in the depths of her heart she feared rather than knew where it was. How frame that awful fear into thought—how admit to herself that it was on the score of religion that he had changed! She would be angry with herself for being thus suspicious, and running to Richard's room she would lay her cheek against his, twining her arms about his neck or holding his hand in hers and would gasp deep into his eyes to read there the lie to her fears. But why would he glance hastily at her and then turn away? Why, when he received her caresses, did he grow embarrassed at her gaze? It used not to be so. Something had happened—how was she changed. "Why, father, know? Did he suspect anything?"

On this glorious evening her heart was heavy within her and she felt aggrieved. She paced the terrace by her father's side, sending her steps to his. Sir Rupert's cloak, thrown carelessly over his shoulder, set off the girl's form, clad in white, as she clung to his arm. They were unlike and could be told at a glance for father and daughter.

As they walked the girl was speaking. "This strange, father, that you perceive it not! I see it more and more. Dick is not the same. He was wont to be; he is no longer the light-hearted boy who shared my every secret, who was my constant companion and playmate. There are times now when he seems to shirk my company, though in all truth, he can scarcely be wearied with it, for he spends little enough time at home nowadays."

The father smiled at her aggrieved tone. "Poor Gwyneth," he said, "she considers herself, doubtless, a very injured maiden. She forgets that when a lad has attained his twenty-second year he looks upon himself as a man, and even the most charming of little counts can scarce keep him tied to her apron strings. He must be away and about his own business."

"And, pray, what is his business? Nought that I cannot persuade him ever to speak of his city doings," answered the girl, with a pout.

Sir Rupert Trevor seemed amused. "And if he did tell thee, Gwyneth, dost think thou wouldst be any the wiser? What could such a little rustic understand of business? Why, even I forbear to question him, for I am but a plain country squire, and could only display my ignorance in city matters. 'Tis different with Dick; he has been to college as his father would have wished. I have loved the boy as a son ever since the day I took him in a weekly little stage of six—before then wert even thought of, Gwyneth—and he has always shown himself worthy of my love and confidence, worthy of his own father, Richard. But 'tis not of Dick I would speak now. Listen, I have news for thee. My old school-fellow, Father Morgan, is now pressed by the priest-hunters, and has sent me word imploring for shelter. I shall receive him gladly to-morrow after high-fall. Let us thank God we shall hear Mass again at last! Once more shall we be permitted to approach the sacraments."

The girl's eyes flashed with excitement, for her father's spirit, with his loyalty to the old faith, burned within her. "What good tidings," she cried; "and if those wicked men come and search for him we shall shut him up safely in the hiding place in the binnacle room, and we shall be rather than betray him. And suppose they do find him after all, father, and we are killed; we shall be martyrs, shall we not?"

Sir Rupert smiled at her enthusiasm. "Nay, they shall not find him," he said; "a priest's life is very precious in these troublous days. I feel quite secure about our hiding hole. None who knew not the secret would ever dream of it, so cunningly set behind the chimney. Ah, here comes Dick; let us tell him our news."

The girl could not explain it, but at that moment a sudden chill struck her heart; she clung to her father's arm. "Nay, do not tell him," she said in an undertone; "he leaves again to-morrow morning for London; 'twill be of no avail for him to know; he will not be here. I pray thee, father, do not speak of it."

"Nonsense, child," he answered, surprised at her manner; "I shall certainly tell him that he may postpone his journey. 'Tis not often the poor lad gets the chance of a Mass, and I would indeed be lacking in my duty were I not to give him the opportunity of assisting."

Gwyneth saw there was no help for it; her cousin was even now approaching. Sir Rupert, at that handsome, made a striking contrast to his nephew. The latter, who was somewhat below the middle height, had none of his uncle's commanding aspect; on the contrary, his weak mouth and shifty blue eyes indicated a character easily awayed by every breath of fortune. He was fond of Sir Rupert in his own way and of his cousin, too, but with him every affection was subservient to the all-engrossing love of self. There were times when he inwardly cursed his uncle's fidelity to the old religion, resulting from him in the miserable misadventure, now all that Sir Rupert could afford him.

Gwyneth let go her father's arm as the young man approached; she would not stay to see how he received the tidings. The girl was fond of her brother-cousin and tried ever to shake off those thoughts and suspicions which would creep upon her when he was near. Turning away she caught sight of the white cap and apron belonging to Dame Rachel Jones, who was about to announce the evening meal. She was the typical old family housekeeper, was the dame, and her love, like that of most old servants, amounted to an almost adoration for Sir Rupert and his beloved little mistress, Gwyneth. But you must not picture her as a placid, sweet-faced old lady. Dame Rachel's sharp features and small, deeply-set eyes, her swift, business-like movements, all tended to show the quickness of perception, the alertness of the old woman. In the bumpy days at Llanfair Court she had ruled the household with a rod of iron, and woe to the man who tried in any way to get a penny more than his due, the dame would be down on him like a hammer.

"If I did not look to Sir Rupert's interests," she would say, "I should like to know who would. I troth the poor, dear gentleman would soon be robbed of every farthing he had, and not know it either."

And now that those days of plenty were over, Dame Rachel still clung to the family; she and old John, the gardener, were all that remained of Sir Rupert's formerly well-filled household.

At the sight of the old servant Gwyneth, in her childish light-heartedness, forgot her momentary trouble and bounded from her father's side to catch the dame affectionately by the arm, all eager to tell her news.

"Rachel, dear, what thinnest thou, I have such news!" she cried. "A priest is coming here and we shall have Mass again, and if those bad soldiers come we shall hide him. And, Rachel, don't let me get to the blue room in readiness for her, she has just released herself from the girl's grasp, speaking with apparent irritation.

"A priest coming here! And what may he want with us, I ask you? I wonder he has not more consideration for poor Sir Rupert than to thrust himself upon him in these days when the harboring of a priest means certain imprisonment, if not worse, I troth we've had enough to bear already!"

Gwyneth only laughed; she knew well the dame.

"My bark is ever worse than thy bite," she said; "don't let welcome Father Morgan as much as any of us, I know. Poor man, my father says he hath been sore pressed of late by the Queen's men."

"Then all the greater reason he should keep away, enwrapped the dame. He told thee, child, that he was what Sir Rupert is about in receiving him. But there as I was ever wont to say, the poor gentleman has no eye to his own interests. I would I managed them for him. I should soon send the priest sailing."

Rachel ejaculated Gwyneth.

"Come now, child, thou knowest well I am as good a Catholic as any of you; indeed, I would to heaven Gwyneth all her rascal Protestant were at the bottom of these seas. To my mind there's a place for everything, and I troth Llanfair Court is no place for priests and Mass in these days."

"Very life," and still grumbling the dame re-entered the house.

Gwyneth laughed as she returned to the men.

"Rachel is in one of her cantankerous moods to-night; she welcomes not the thought of Father Morgan."

"Poor old Rachel," said Sir Rupert; "if ever a faithful heart rested beneath a sharp exterior, it is hers. Dick here says he may not stay over the morrow."

"Oh! why that deadly chill again? The girl's voice had lost its joyous tone as she addressed her cousin."

"Do stay, Dicky," she said; "why must thou hasten thus away?"

"I would indeed I might remain," replied the youth, at the same time avoiding those clear, truthful eyes. "I long, like thee, to hear Mass once more, but duty calls, and I must from hence on urgent business. I may return, however, before he leaves," he added, after a slight pause.

"Come, that is right, Dicky, my lad," exclaimed his uncle, cordially; "I know that thou wilt do thy best. Now, let us to supper."

That night, when all but himself lay wrapped in slumber, Richard Trevor paced restlessly up and down his room, with knitted brows and hands clenched.

"It must be done," he muttered; "twill never do to allow such a chance to slip me. This fellow Morgan is the very man they are bent on taking; the price of his capture will be well worth the having. And yet—but why should I hesitate? The only my business, for what am I?—a paid spy, easy work and good wage! But that Norton, now he did threaten me, we shall be martyrs, shall we not?"

In my service to lead the life of a lazy dog? 'Tis time thou hearest thyself! Track out that rascal Morgan or in the baggage. What a chance! Here is the Morgan flying to my very arms! Norton and his band are scarce thirty miles away; I have but to ride hence and make my terms. Ah! I forgot my uncle! Should they capture a priest beneath his roof he will be in danger. 'Twill be certain imprisonment, if not death. Nay, I cannot—he has been more than a father to me all these years. And little Gwyneth—I love her, too—shall I cause her this bitter grief? Nay, I have not fallen to me all these years. The money—God knows I need it. And Norton's favor—in a moment he can turn me into a penniless and in debt. Surely there is a way between the two. I shall find it—must. And he paced feverishly up and down. All at once he drew up. "I have it!" he cried. "It shall be done! The money shall be mine and yet my uncle shall be safe. I'll think I'll go to London on the morrow. I shall return quickly with pressing tidings to Sir Rupert. His sister, the Lady Marjory, shall be in danger of death and implore his presence. He will go. In his absence Norton and his band shall come. The priest discovered, I shall see after him. I shall warn him to keep away. As for Gwyneth, the child will be safe enough in Dame Rachel's care."

And so the night wore away and the household of Llanfair slept peacefully on, all unconscious of the danger brooding in their very midst.

CHAPTER II.

On the morning following Father Morgan's arrival Gwyneth set out on her pale-frey to tell an old servant who lived at some distance of the priest's presence and to bid him to come to the court.

"How rejoiced he will be," she thought as she passed the avenue gates, and gaily shaking her bridle she set off at a brisk canter across an open bit of country. Her soul was happy within her—for had she not assisted once more at the great sacrifice and rescued some papers from the hands of the priest? Whom she was ready to suffer so much? Coming to the cross-roads she paused a moment. Her eyes followed the white line winding far away to the left.

"In a few days," she thought, "Dick will be returning from London by this way, and he will be here to meet him and leave him."

She turned her horse's head in the opposite direction, along the less frequented lane which passed by the old man's dwelling. Trotting briskly she turned a sharp corner and came unexpectedly upon a horseman riding slowly toward her. He was wearing a priest's habit, and his hand, so that she could not see his face. She glanced at his horse inquisitively.

"Surely that is Black Saladin," she said, unconsciously speaking aloud. "How comes a stranger to be riding him?"

At the sound of her voice the man reined up. "Richard!" she cried in amazement. For a moment she was utterly taken aback. "Dick! I cannot be thee!" she exclaimed, approaching him.

Apparently startled he drew in his horse, quickly thrusting the papers into his doublet.

"Nay, not forsooth," he replied, hastily; "have I not as much right to ride on the Queen's highway as thou thyself, Mistress Gwyneth?"

"Yes, yes," she half laughed, but continued, still in amazement. "I thought thou wert still in London; how comes it that thou art here? What business was so quickly despatched?"

"Thou art not overjoyed to see me, methinks. Does my unexpected presence disturb thee or my uncle or interfere with your devotions? If so I can return from whence I came, and he half turned his horse."

"Nay, stay, Dick, stay! Thou knowest I mean not that. I was but surprised at this unexpected meeting."

Suddenly a thought struck her. "But Richard, say! thou canst not have been to London, for thou comest from the wrong direction!"

Reining over his horse he hesitated before replying.

"Black Saladin cast ashore, and I sought the nearest ferry at hand. But come, sweet Gwyneth, let us return together; and tell me how fares it with Father Morgan; would he see me again, and he laid his hand on her bridle to lead her home."

"Nay, Dick, must ride on, for my father hath but now made me seek out old Daniel and tell him the glad news. I will speed swiftly and will be with thee ere long."

"Nay, Gwyneth, thou canst not do so," the girl's eyes spoke her surprise.

"And why not, forsooth? My father's errands are not to be so lightly discarded. Leave my bridle, Richard, and let me go!"

"Dear cousin, I have good reason in seeking to hinder thee. My father has a purpose in what I say; thou canst not go."

"But I must, I will go," she cried. Seeing her prepare to ride on, the lad became exasperated and angrily clutched her arm.

"Thou shalt not, I say. Look thee, wench, in yonder hollow a whole company of troopers lies hid. Thinkest thou I will let thee ride by, to be jeered at and insulted, perchance?"

"Soldiers, Dick, soldiers!" she passed her hand over her brow in a dazed manner. "Why are the soldiers here, Richard?" She caught his arm and gazed anxiously into his face. "How dost thou know, good Dick, that they are here?"

"Because I have seen them, thou silly wench," he answered, sullenly; "but come. I have looked long enough; let us ride home." He spurred on Black Saladin and caught the bridle of the white palfrey.

Once again that sudden chill struck the girl's heart and a heavy foreboding fear passed over her. Silently she rode by her cousin's side, thinking deeply. And as they gained the terrace Sir Rupert appeared in the doorway.

"What now, my Richard! Art back again so soon? This is indeed sweet fortune."

"Ay, good uncle, I have made great speed, for, alas! I bring evil tidings. Thy sister, the Lady Marjory, lies in London dangerously ill, even at death's door. I fear me, and greatly desire thy presence."

"This sad news, indeed," groaned Sir Rupert, "but God grant she may yet recover. I will to her this very day. Look thee, lad, do thou prepare my own good horse for my journey to-night. I have many things to do ere I start, but with

God's grace I will set forth at sunset. Will see to it, Dick?"

"Gladly, uncle," he led the palfrey away, Black Saladin following by his side.

"And now, my Gwyneth, let us visit the good priest and tell him of this fresh sorrow: he will succor us by his prayers."

"But, father, I have also evil tidings: the soldiers are hard by, encamped beyond the wood. Thinkest thou, my father, that they have heard a priest lies here?"

"Tut, tut, child, the soldiers are ever on the move just now. Their presence here portends no evil to us. But I am glad, sweet child, thou hast told me, for it behooves us to use every caution. I grieve me that I must away to London, but yet I think my absence will tend to allay all suspicion. They will never dream that a priest is harbored here while I am elsewhere. Thou art growing fanciful, child, and seest danger at every turn. Come, my Gwyneth, kiss thy father, then run and bid Rachel prepare for my journey about sundown."

With his own hands Richard saddled Sir Rupert's horse that evening and led him from the stables. Twilight was settling on the country side, beginning to shroud all things in its sombre, mystic gloom. Dick knew that now every movement was precious, and it was with difficulty that he restrained his impatience. At length his uncle appeared on the doorstep, closely followed by Gwyneth, who was bravely trying to force back the tears which would rise up in spite of herself.

"Yon comes a priest hunting, all the while I am away, Dick," said Sir Rupert, cheerily. "Well, John, what is it?" he added, as the old man came hobbling up, apparently in a great state of excitement.

"Please, yer honor, there's the Queen's men, soldiers, acoming over the hill at the back of the court. They're making for the court, yer honor!"

Gwyneth grew deadly pale; for a moment she could scarcely stand.

"It has come at last!" she thought. Dick muttered an angry exclamation under his breath. He must make one more effort, now or never!

His face was flushed with excitement and there was a strange quiver in his voice as he urgently addressed Sir Rupert.

"My uncle," he said, "I implore thee, postpone not thy journey another instant! I will but draw down the curtains to see the three soldiers on the very spot of setting forth. Believe me, go as though nothing were amiss. Leave the rest to me. I assure thee it is best!"

"Perhaps thou art right," replied Sir Rupert, slowly, "and yet I like not to leave the child—"

"Think of her," interrupted Richard, chiding with impatience; "I shall make her my first thought. I undertake to disarm all suspicion. Leave all to me!"

"I trust thee, Dick; I shall go." It was almost more than Richard could bear; he bowed under the honest, confident gaze of his nephew, and turned, turning away to hide his confusion.

"I go to parley with the captain; 'twill better cover thy departure."

"Rachel, have you my saddle bag?" called Sir Rupert, his foot on the stirrup.

"Tis here, master," he re-entered the house, and, as he took the bag, the old servant staid by him. Her sharp eyes looked keenly into his as he well nigh hissed the words:

"Beware! we are betrayed! See here!" and she produced a paper signed by Thomas Norton to the effect that a certain sum of money should be paid to Richard Trevor on his delivering James Morgan, Popish priest, into the hands of the State.

"I found it but now in Master Dick's room," she said; "there are few who can go undetected when Rachel is about!" and she almost smiled in triumph at her own cunning.

Sir Rupert grasped the back of an oaken chair for support; for a moment everything seemed to reel about him. He saw it all—Richard's absence, his prompt re-appearance with a forged story, his impatience to get his uncle safely away; he saw, as clear as day, the danger that lay in wait for him. With a well-nigh superhuman effort of will he collected his thoughts. But a few moments for action remained. The priest must be saved, but how?

"Rachel," he said, "I charge you, speak of this to no one, and without another word he had turned and bounded up the stairs."

Meanwhile Gwyneth, who had followed her cousin to the corner of the house, stood gazing at the distance, watching with a strange fascination the band of men as they hastened down the steep road toward the river. As the first of the band came to such a well-known Catholic house. They might search as much as they wished, but they could never find the hiding place—unless—ah! why had Dick been so queer of late? Why had he been so eager to get rid of his uncle? A few moments for action remained. The priest must be saved, but how?

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loose!" and giving vent to a harsh, triumphant laugh he led the lad on.

"Look thee, Master Norton," exclaimed Richard, "I have played a dangerous game and led thee to fortune and favor. Thou knowest the priest is here, but with-out my aid he will not be found, and I swear I will not help thee unless thou promise on thy conscience that the girl, my cousin, shall not be injured or in any way molested by thy brutal men."

"Tut, boy, my business is not with maidens, but with massing priests. On my oath my men shall not touch a hair of thy pretty cousin, and for that matter," he added, waving his hand majestically, "I extend the same protection to all the women. They cannot hinder us in our work. Regarding thine uncle, Rupert Trevor, I will not pledge myself. Methinks he may like enough prove troublesome."

"On that score, Master Norton, thou needst have no fear. My uncle is now in London attending the death-bed of his sister."

The priest-hunter cast a glance of suspicion at the youth, then apparently satisfied: "Perhaps 'tis as well," he remarked; "our way will be the clearer. But hark thee, renegade, not one penny shalt thou receive till that dog Morgan is fast bound and cuffed; thou understandest, methinks?"

Richard nodded assent, but his hands clutched the angry hatred he feared to show. Assuming another manner, he turned to him deprecatingly.

"Good Master Norton, I would not that I should be colored with thine old man's knowledge soon that this is a test. Give me not away. With thy good leave I would appear at first to be against thee and thy band. But when the blue room is reached and Mistress Trevor is safe in her own chamber I will point out the secret place and press the spring, too, if necessary," he added hastily, the color flamed to his cheeks.

Norton laughed harshly.

"Thou girl!" he jeered, "so soft and dainty in thy feelings, so shamefaced in thy deeds! I must needs make a man of thee, and this will be my first step to-night. Well, be it so. I will not teach thee to think ill of the sooner can be met. Thou canst not escape us now, and these are mere trifles."

By this time they had reached the houses, and Norton placed his men so that no one could possibly pass undetected. The main door was still open and Gwyneth and Dame Rachel stood in the hall.

"Here, woman," said Norton, addressing the old servant, "it hath come to my ears that you have one of your rascally priests secreted here in this Papist den. Lead me at once to his hole."

The dame looked him up and down for some moments in silent contempt.

"Yon comes a priest hunting, all the while I am away, Dick," said Sir Rupert, cheerily. "Well, John, what is it?" he added, as the old man came hobbling up, apparently in a great state of excitement.

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