

CHRISTMAS EVE AT THE GRANGE

BY ARTHUR W. MARCHMONT.

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When Awdrey sent her young brother, Gorham, spurring to Hurdingle to fetch me in hot haste to Lanston Grange, I knew the cause must be urgent and scented danger in the air. We had heard whisperings and mutterings of fresh Jacobite trouble, and I feared my uncle, Sir Guy Lanston, had allowed himself to be drawn once more into the business.

Some ten days before a stranger, a Master Richard Lovelace, had appeared suddenly at the grange, and my uncle had set off on a mysterious visit from which he had not returned. Now it was concerning this Lovelace that something of a cloud had come between my sweet Awdrey and me. I had come upon the two in close conversation, and had seen the fellow kiss her hand with a look in his dark eyes that had set my blood tingling and my fingers pricking with a desire to punish him for his meddlesome intrigues.

Awdrey had but laughed at my moody remonstrance, and when I questioned her would tell me nothing.

"Geoffrey, Geoffrey, you but worsen matters," she cried, with a toss of her pretty head. "Because a gallant gentleman in a hard case lays his lips to Awdrey's poor fingers and your wits are not sharp enough to see the rea-

son, you must needs leap like a blind horseman into the slough of mistrust and cry, 'It is Awdrey's fault.' Is everything you cannot understand to be Awdrey's fault?"

"And were my lips to go a-mumbling Mistress Pallister's fingers would you cry 'Geoffrey is right. Well met, lips and fingers?'"

"Mistress Pallister, forsooth!" she exclaimed again in high dragoon, and walked away with her head in the air.

"If you leave me like that, Awdrey, I'd better go and—"

She broke into my surly words with a laugh.

"Yes, better go away and stay away until your wits are sharpened enough to guess the riddle of your own mistrust. Mistress Pallister, indeed!"

"I'll return when my Master Lovelace has gone," I replied stantly, and came away; and for a week had not been to the grange. Seven miserable days had been. So you may think how my heart beat when I got her message by young Gorham, and knew that in the time of danger she had turned to me, and how willingly I sent my horse galloping straight across country to Lanston that bright December morning.

She was waiting for me in the large domed hall of the grange, pacing restlessly up and down by the huge equestrian statue—the statue of old Sir Guy, who fought with the great Edward and won his gold spurs at Cressy and Poitiers, and founded the Lanston family. Her face and manner were full of trouble.

"I have not forgiven you, Sir Mistrust, though I have sent for you," she said; but her sweet blue eyes were telling another tale.

"You are in trouble, sweetheart. When I have helped you, send me away again if you will," I said.

"You have learned how to stay away."

"And a harder penance never gripped a penitent, Awdrey."

"A sincere penitent should never sue in vain, it is true," she said demurely; and then with a smile looked up and added: "So you're forgiven. And, O, Geoffrey, the trouble is sore, indeed."

"Tell me," I answered, and when she did tell me I saw in truth she had not underjudged it. This Lovelace was a far greater one than I had deemed—no less than the young Pretender himself. He had come over at

the bidding of certain reckless counsellors who had advised that a rising could be organized if he would but show himself to his followers; and now the plans and all mislaid, his presence in England had been discovered, and he had fled to Lanston to hide while means could be devised for his crossing again to France. It was this business which had taken Sir Guy away, and the ill news had come that he had been laid by the heels by his old enemy, the gout, and had done nothing.

Nor was that the worst. Sir Burton Prendergast had got wind of the matter in some way, and might be trusted to do his worst against Lanston. A more malignant, rancorous, spiteful rat of a man did not breathe in all the good county of Sussex than Sir Burton, and he had never forgiven Awdrey for having rejected him year ago, nor for having won her from him, and would welcome a chance to strike at Lanston. If it were known who Lovelace was, and that the grange had sheltered him, the consequences would be no less than ruin. The government had not yet forgiven Sir Guy for his old Jacobite work, and would readily seize on any pretext now for punishing him and his.

"I don't know what to do, Geoffrey,"

"You can see for yourself," I said.

cried my cousin, wringing her hands distractedly. "Tomorrow we have, as you know, our customary Christmas eve masquerade and every one will be here; and if he does not show among the guests suspicion will be aroused, while if he does he may be recognized and we shall be ruined."

"He must be away, sweetheart. I can do it. Why didn't Sir Guy come to me?"

"Because you are not with us in this."

"True, I am no Jacobite, but when was a Hardingle not with Lanston in an hour of trouble? But I can do it. I will."

"I knew you would," and she smiled as she laid her hand in mine.

"I see it," I exclaimed, as a thought struck me. "I'll to Shoreham and charter a vessel from old Nick Nessel; by there, and we'll have her off the coast by dusk tomorrow and a boat in Master's cove, down by Dencher's gully, ready manned for Master Lovelace by then. Let him keep close till then; nay, better let him ride away openly this afternoon and return secretly after dark, then lie here hidden till the morrow at dusk. I'll be here to guide him, and if we don't tick this Pretender, write me down fool."

"Where can we hide him, Geoffrey?" cried Awdrey, nervously. "If anyone should come they will surely find him here."

"No one will come, sweetheart. And they do have you no the slightest hiding place in all the three kingdoms, here in this very hall? It is not the first time old Sir Guy has served and saved the Lanstons. Where are your sharp woman's wits, dearest?"

"Of course, I had forgotten the bronze horse," and she smiled.

The statue was, in truth, a hiding place of the best. In the troubles of the civil war the Lanston of his day had conceived a cunning arrangement by which arms and ammunition and at need a fugitive royalist could be hidden in the great house. By a shrewd contrivance the legs of the knight swung on hinges and covered a space large enough to admit a man's body; the entrance being concealed by the armour of the horse; and means had been devised by which Sir Guy could be admitted through the joints of the armor.

I lost no time, but rode off at once on my errand. I had but little difficulty

in providing the needed vessel and arranging among my own men for the boat to be in readiness at Master's cove, and so though it was I rattled to Lanston to tell Awdrey that all was well.

But Sir Burton Prendergast was not in my charge, Awdrey and young Gorham and I stood in the decorated hall chatting with that mingling of nervousness and strained cheerfulness which the crisis of such a matter will commonly evoke when the actors are all alike full of anxiety and each wishes to hide the feeling from the others.

"We are rather like our guest in build, Geoffrey," said Gorham, but Awdrey protested with a blush and a flash of the eyes. Gorham, boylike, was the most positive for the protest, however, and made me stand with my back to them while he pointed out the marks of resemblance, and we were still discussing this when we caught sight of the guest coming down stairs. Just at that same moment one of the serving men dashed in at the front

point of arrival. I would beg you to do your worst speedily."

Without more ado a number of the men were brought in, and while Awdrey, Gorham and I waited in the hall, they spread all over the house and searched it from roof to cellar. At the end of an hour or so Capt. Hilary came with many apologies for the unwelcome business, and declared that he had evidently been misled by wrong information.

We watched the soldiers form up and depart, and Awdrey drew a deep sigh of relief as she linked her arm in mine.

"How good that you were here, Geoffrey," she whispered. "And what next?"

"As soon as they are well away, your guest and I must be off, Gorham, see to the horses are ready, and then slip away and watch the men well out of sight, and note the road they take. Quick, lad!"

Awdrey and I waited alone together in the hall. The strain of the excitement had wrought upon her nerves somewhat, and she was very sweet, gracious and loving, as I sought to soothe and reassure her. Gorham came hurrying in.

"There's something wrong, still, Geoffrey," Sir Burton Prendergast was waiting by Overbury Cross, and met the captain there, the Sir Burton's confidence, and are now coming back here together. Can Sir Burton know anything?"

"We shall see, and must hope he does not," I answered quickly, and soon after Capt. Hilary returned Sir Burton with him.

The officer came to the point at once. He had learned that the prisoner he sought was still in the house, and he must therefore take further measures, and must remain in the grange."

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