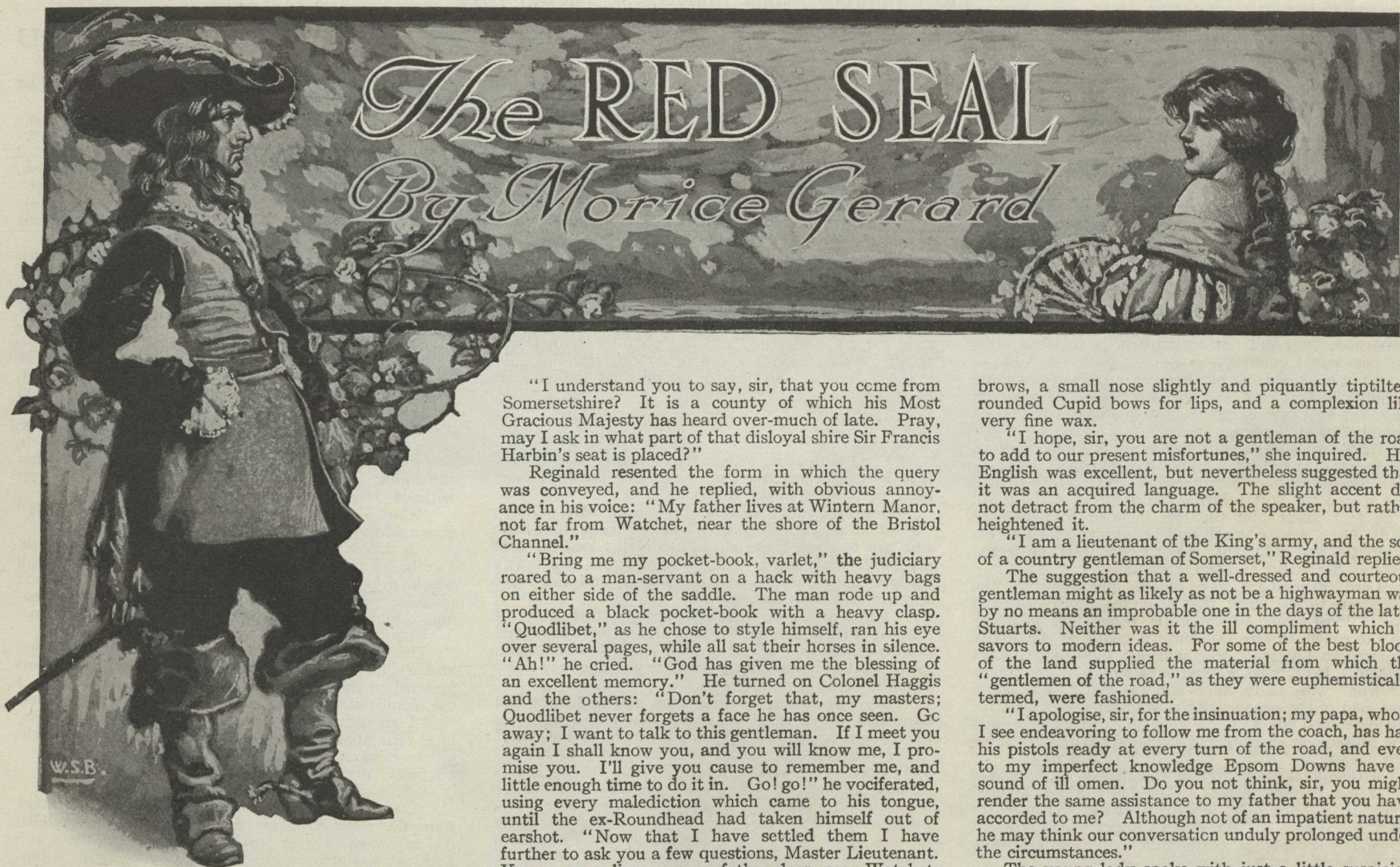




SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS

Katherine Allardyce refuses to think of her cousin, Reginald Barton, Lieutenant of the King's Dragoons, in any other light than that of a brother. She, however, promises to remember him when leaving for London to enlist in a regiment fighting to establish King James II. on the throne of England. While on the way to London he meets with a party of horsemen at the entrance of a forge where pikes are being made. In the midst of an argument with Colonel Haggis, a pompous person with a troop of dragoons rides up and questions Reginald as to his business and intentions for the future.

"I CAN answer so far for this gentleman, my lord," he said, bowing to the judiciary. "I have known him for some years. He is Lieutenant Harbin, late of the King's forces in the dependency of Tangier, son of Colonel Sir Francis Harbin, of Wintern Manor, who distinguished himself under his Majesty's late lamented father." The officer said a few words to the gentleman in the laced coat, of which the only words the lieutenant caught were "Colonel Churchill." Here was another amusing coincidence with his previous inquisition. Churchill had established for himself a position which rendered him of the very greatest importance to both parties. Neither quite trusted him, so both coquetted for his favors. Had either his powers been inferior or his probity greater, by an irony of fact, his importance would have been less.

The judiciary, armed with this information, public and private, spoke in a very different tone, less hectoring and more conciliatory.

"You have only to assure me of your errand, Lieutenant Harbin, to permit me to wish you a pleasant journey."

"I was on my way to offer myself to the King's service, after a brief visit I have been paying to my father at Wintern."

"That is a worthy errand, sir, which will, I am sure, meet with success. Then you know nothing of these men?" indicating Colonel Haggis and his following, who were within earshot.

"I have never seen any one of them before," Lieutenant Harbin replied in clear tones, which were audible to all who were of Haggis's company.

"That will suffice as to you, sir." The judiciary turned on the ex-Roundhead. "You are a horse of a very different color; you look to me very much like one of those accursed sectaries—faugh! your very appearance savors of the usurper Oliver a league off."

"You do not deny it, sirrah?"

"I neither deny nor affirm, my lord; the past is gone by, and the King's amnesty covers all."

Lieutenant Harbin cast an amused glance over the malcontents of the colonel's party; not one of them now displayed the parti-colored ribbons which were so much in evidence half an hour before. These men might be misguided, but they had their modicum of caution. Was this the same material out of which Cromwell had weaved his "Invincibles"? Again the lieutenant doubted.

"Well, we shall have our eye on you," the judiciary remarked, with an ominous snap of the jaw, which somehow unpleasantly suggested a wild beast. "And if you are caught red-handed short will be your shift, and long the rope destined for your necks, my masters."

The lieutenant had shaken hands with Colonel Kirke, commanding the King's troopers. He had known him, as the latter had said, at Tangier, and although the colonel was not to his liking, he respected him as a good and bold soldier. Reginald was about to ride away with his servant when the judiciary addressed a question which, apparently insignificant, proved to be one of those hinges on which great doors turn, out of which was to come great disquiet and anxiety.

"I understand you to say, sir, that you come from Somersetshire? It is a county of which his Most Gracious Majesty has heard over-much of late. Pray, may I ask in what part of that disloyal shire Sir Francis Harbin's seat is placed?"

Reginald resented the form in which the query was conveyed, and he replied, with obvious annoyance in his voice: "My father lives at Wintern Manor, not far from Watchet, near the shore of the Bristol Channel."

"Bring me my pocket-book, varlet," the judiciary roared to a man-servant on a hack with heavy bags on either side of the saddle. The man rode up and produced a black pocket-book with a heavy clasp. "Quodlibet," as he chose to style himself, ran his eye over several pages, while all sat their horses in silence. "Ah!" he cried. "God has given me the blessing of an excellent memory." He turned on Colonel Haggis and the others: "Don't forget that, my masters; Quodlibet never forgets a face he has once seen. Go away; I want to talk to this gentleman. If I meet you again I shall know you, and you will know me, I promise you. I'll give you cause to remember me, and little enough time to do it in. Go! go!" he vociferated, using every malediction which came to his tongue, until the ex-Roundhead had taken himself out of earshot. "Now that I have settled them I have further to ask you a few questions, Master Lieutenant. You say you live, or your father does, near Watchet. Is there not a certain lawyer in your district named Startin—Matthew Startin?"

Reginald really knew little of the people of the district in which the Manor was situated, but the lawyer was too notorious to be unfamiliar to anyone, and fresh in his memory was Katherine Allardyce's communication.

"Yes, sir; I hardly know him by sight, but have heard of him."

"So have I heard of him," chuckled the judiciary, with a harsh laugh. "And I want to hear more—I want to hear more. It strikes me that I shall stretch his neck before I have done with him, but I'll have him flogged first, s'help me. A flogging is excellent medicine for a traitor lawyer; then the hemp afterwards. Look you here, sir. I shall go to this Wintern of yours, and make my headquarters there while I look into the affairs of this precious district, where they do not know a good King when they have one. Write me a line on your tablet, and I will present it to your father by way of introduction. I can command in the King's name what I require, but with a gentleman who has bled for his late Majesty I prefer to ask hospitality at his hands. This for your private ear." He bent towards Reginald. "You can mention my name, sir, in confidence to your respected father. Say that my Lord Jeffreys comes to him on private inquisition from his Majesty."

To Reginald the name then meant little or nothing. Little he thought as he and Colbert rode away, after he had scribbled a few lines and handed them to the judiciary, that the name would come to mean more than any other in all England, ere a couple of months or so had passed, and that he was sending to the Manor a viper that was to bite the hand held out to it.

CHAPTER III.

THE "THREE CROWNS."

THE heavy coach rolled ominously.

"Lud!" cried a clear, feminine voice. "What is going to happen?"

The query was instantly answered. Amid a volley of expletives from a throaty male bass, and a frightened scream from a thin treble, a wheel flew into the ditch, and the big vehicle sank down on one side.

Reginald Harbin, attended by Colbert, had just ridden up. Reginald was off his saddle in an instant, and, leaving his man, who had also dismounted, to hold both their horses, ran to the leaders' heads. The almost slim appearance of the lieutenant hardly suggested the great strength which went with it. In a minute or two, partly by sheer force, partly by that knowledge of horsecraft which comes of love for the animals, Harbin had managed to quiet the leaders, and with the assistance of the servants to bring the whole team into sufficient subjection, so that the occupants of the coach might be extricated from their unpleasant if not now perilous predicament.

His plumed hat in hand, Harbin first assisted the lady to alight. The task was performed with some difficulty as the door had jammed in the fall, and had to be practically torn from its hinges. It was nine o'clock of the night, and the sun just at the setting. Shot athwart the somewhat dreary common land of Epsom, the departing rays lighted up the figure of the girl, who, though dressed in the height of fashion becoming to a more mature age, was evidently still in her teens. She blushed as Reginald assisted her with his hand. A male heart, even when completely filled with the memory of one object, cannot fail to be sensible of beauty in another. This girl was very beautiful, although her type was not that of an English maid. She had sparkling black eyes, surmounted by arched

brows, a small nose slightly and piquantly tiptilted, rounded Cupid bows for lips, and a complexion like very fine wax.

"I hope, sir, you are not a gentleman of the road to add to our present misfortunes," she inquired. Her English was excellent, but nevertheless suggested that it was an acquired language. The slight accent did not detract from the charm of the speaker, but rather heightened it.

"I am a lieutenant of the King's army, and the son of a country gentleman of Somerset," Reginald replied.

The suggestion that a well-dressed and courteous gentleman might as likely as not be a highwayman was by no means an improbable one in the days of the later Stuarts. Neither was it the ill compliment which it savors to modern ideas. For some of the best blood of the land supplied the material from which the "gentlemen of the road," as they were euphemistically termed, were fashioned.

"I apologise, sir, for the insinuation; my papa, whom I see endeavoring to follow me from the coach, has had his pistols ready at every turn of the road, and even to my imperfect knowledge Epsom Downs have a sound of ill omen. Do you not think, sir, you might render the same assistance to my father that you have accorded to me? Although not of an impatient nature, he may think our conversation unduly prolonged under the circumstances."

The young lady spoke with just a little suspicion of sarcasm in her voice. It was Reginald's turn to blush now. For having assisted her to alight, he had forgotten to release her hand, being bewildered by the beauty in the sun-setting, and perhaps taken aback by her inquiry as to whether he were a highwayman. Without more ado than an apology under his breath, the lieutenant ran to the assistance of the young lady's father, whose movement was impeded by a pistol which he held in his right hand, and by the sword scabbard which, jerking out, had got wedged in the broken hinge of the coach door.

"If you have come to rob us you will have to settle with me first, sir," the gentleman bellowed in French.

Reginald replied in the same tongue, although his mastery of it was imperfect. He reassured the owner of the coach as to his honorable intentions, and then helped to extricate him from the debris. The two footmen, who had been flung into the ditch from the dickey behind, now came up. They had sustained nothing worse than a fright and a severe shaking.

The gentleman now spoke in English, of which he was a very fair master. "This confounded accident will prevent us pursuing our journey to London to-night. It is most unfortunate, as his Majesty has commanded me, and I was to appear before him as speedily as possible. Let me introduce myself, sir. I am Count Lewis Duras, nephew of Field-Marshal Turenne, styled in England, by the signal favor of his Majesty, Earl of Feversham." The stranger spoke in pompous tones. Reginald, casting a glance at the lady, thought that a half smile lurked about the beautiful mouth.

He bowed, and made his own introduction to the sire, as he had before done to the daughter.

"I am Lieutenant Reginald Harbin, late of the King's Horse in his dependency of Tangier, son of Colonel Sir Francis Harbin, of Wintern Manor, in the County of Somerset."

"I am glad to hear, sir, that you have been so well employed, and come of so good a stock. It is possible that this meeting may be to your advantage if you are seeking further service, or a rise in the honorable profession of arms which you have selected for yourself."

"It is with that purpose that I am on my way to London," Reginald replied. "I hope to enlist the support of my Lord Churchill, my commanding officer in Tangier."

"Accompany our party to London, young sir, and I think I can promise you a support quite as likely to be efficacious as that of my Lord Churchill or anyone else short of the blood royal."

Reginald was not too enamoured of this pompous gentleman, who, he thought, promised over much on so short an acquaintance. Again he looked at the lady, and her eyes seconded the invitation.

"We shall be glad of your escort, sir, and, as my father says, he has influence with his Majesty."

The girl had suggested a double motive. The young man, with his stout servant, who had already rendered assistance at a critical moment, might be of further service while they traversed a district which had an unpleasant reputation for lawlessness. Lieutenant Harbin, reflecting that it would probably only delay his arrival in the Metropolis by a few hours, assented although he expected nothing from the patronage offered, in which after events proved that he was mistaken.

"I am honored," he said, "by your lordship's invitation, and shall do myself the pleasure of accepting it."

Earl Feversham put away his pistol, and in exchange brought out from his vest pocket a gold snuff-box bearing the Royal arms. "A present from his gracious Majesty," he said, tapping the box, and after in vain