

taken. Three out of four who sat there were aware that my lord had used that name in his wild and boyish days, when he would be *incognito*; and, moreover, the use of even that flimsy disguise cast a sort of decent probability over a story, which at its barest seemed credible. For the first time the balance of credit and probability swung against my lord; a fact subtly indicated by the silence which followed the statement and lasted a brief while; no one at the table speaking or volunteering a farther question. For the time Matthew Smith was forgotten—or the gleam of insolent triumph in his eye might have said somewhat. For the time Sir John took a lower seat. Men's minds were busy with the Duke, and the Duke only; busy with what the result would be to him, and to the party, were this proved; while most, perceiving dully and by instinct that they touched upon a great tragedy, shrank from the *dénouement*.

At last, in the silence, the Duke rose; and swaying blindly on his feet, caught at the table to steady himself. For two nights he had not slept.

"Duke," said the King suddenly, "you had better speak sitting."

The words were meant in kindness, but they indicated a subtle change of attitude—they indicated that even the King now felt the need of explanation and a defence; and my lord, seeing this, and acknowledging the invitation to be seated only by a slight reverence, continued to stand, though the effort made his weakness evident. Yet when he had cleared his throat and spoke, his voice had the old ring of authority—with a touch of pathos added, as of a dying King from whose hand the sceptre was passing.

"Sir," he said, "the sins of Colonel Talbot were not few. But this, to which this fellow speaks, is not of the number. Nor have you, or my lords, to do with them. Doubtless, with my fellows, I shall have to give an ac-