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LORD DACRE OF GILSLAND; OR, THE RISING IN THE NORTH.

AN HISTORICAL ROMANCE OF THE DAYS OF ELIZABETH.

By E. M. Stewart.

CHAPTER XV.—(CONTINUED.)

There was a great bustle in the streets of London that day, for it was said that a band of conspirators who, in union with the Queen of Scots, had formed a design upon the life of Elizabeth, were then to undergo their first examination. It was understood that these conspirators were all young men of rank and birth, and as it had been also said that their treason was not connected with the northern rising, a great curiosity prevailed. From all parts of London the people thronged towards the Palace of Whitehall, there to loiter about the gates, each eager to be the first to learn the names of the conspirators, and many, alas, trembling with the apprehension that among those names they might hear that of some beloved friend.

Through this crowd of people slowly endeavored to force their way a strange-looking old man, with a female hanging on his arm; but whether she was young or old, beautiful or the reverse, her closely-drawn hood and wrapping cloak forbade the spectators to determine.

Some struggling and scuffling there was among the crowd, for it was not forgotten by the curious that there were other offenders against her Grace to be hanged that morning at Tyburn; and in the Strand, while some endeavoring to force their way forward with all possible speed, anxious to be among the first who arrived at Whitehall, others as pertinaciously hurried on in the opposite direction, designing to meet the unfortunate convicts at the top of the Chepe, whence, with that fine taste and feeling for which the mob have been in all ages remarkable, they intended to accompany them on their journey to Tyburn. Though animated by far other than such motives, the old man and the female who accompanied him were equally anxious to see those prisoners. They did not speak, but the hand of the woman often trembled violently on the arm of her companion. On reaching the top of the Chepe, they found the multitude to be so great that the procession to Tyburn had been interrupted. A cavalcade, too, of men and horses, gaily caparisoned, came at the moment rattling up from the city, and loud and hard words were exchanged between these people and the conductors of the convicts. The old man and his companion had been forced into the foremost rank of the crowd—a position which, though it highly favored their design of seeing the condemned prisoners, was yet almost dreaded by the female on account of its publicity. Of these prisoners who were dragged upon a hurdle, two were men sentenced, said the crowd, for robbing on the highway; the third was a female—no other than the miserable Bertha Allen.

"Heaven be thanked," whispered the old man's companion, "my father and uncle are not among these unhappy people. But I pray you, good Master Williams, declare whether mine eyes deceive me, or if that haggard, wretched-looking woman be not our sometimes-gay Mistress Allen."

"In faith, my gentle Lucy," replied Master Williams, "yonder is, I think, indeed, Mistress Allen. Good lack, good lack, and is it come to this! She could never let the concerns of her neighbors alone, and such is the end of her meddlings."

"Well, 'tis an ill wind that blows nobody good, and a joyful day must this be for Master Allen. We knew, indeed, that the dame was condemned; but I thought not it would come to this."

Lucy scarce attended to these remarks; she was for the time unconscious of everything but the pitiable condition of Bertha. The malevolent disposition of that woman had not indeed, escaped the observation of even the gentle Lucy, and she had, on more than one occasion, perceived that this malevolent was especially directed against her cousin Gertrude; but she had not imagined the extent of Bertha's malice, nor could she, without a mingled sensation of pity and horror, behold in so lamentable a state a person who had set at her father's board and drunk of his cup. As for Bertha, she was apparently unconscious of the scene around her. Her hands were clasped together, and she had her face buried in her bosom, as if she had been weeping.

"Dear Lucy," said the old man, "I have seen her in a better state of mind than this. I have seen her when she was as merry as a lark, and as full of life as a young colt. But now, alas, she is as dead as a stone, and as dumb as a dog."

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to be so vain—hung in tangled masses about her shoulders, and her eyes, though not closed, had in them a glassy, unconscious stare.

Meanwhile the cavilling between the horsemen and the officers still continued.

"Drag thy gallews were out of the way, fellows!" said one of the former; "if thou dost not give place to my Lord, he will brain thee with his riding-whip."

"Take thyself out of the way, and let thy Lord go with thee," said the officer; "what will come next if the servants of her Grace and of the good city of London are to be interrupted in their duty by a troop of saucy Jacks such as thou, with a rattle-pole lord to bear thee out in thy brags?"

"We shall see, we shall see, fellows!" said the servant, still endeavoring to make way; while out of pure perverseness and to block up the road, the officers ordered the hurdle to be drawn forward.

At this moment three more horsemen came galloping up the Chepe, one of whom was the nobleman alluded to. He haughtily bade the officers make way as he advanced, and those worthies recognizing in him the chief favorite of their Queen, the Earl of Leicester, thought proper to gulp down the affronts which his retainers had offered to their dignity, and command the hurdle to be drawn aside, that the Earl might pass. His name, however, repeated by the crowd, caught the ear of the female convict.

"Her face then lost its apathy, and became in a moment agitated with all the frenzy of hope. She screamed wildly, and struggled to free her hands from the cords which confined them.

"Dear Lord! sweet Lord!" she cried, "you come to save me now. I knew I knew you would!"

This petition from a miserable convict to the proud Earl of Leicester might possibly have excited some animadversion among the people; but the woman's sudden scream had the effect of partly startling the horse which Leicester rode, and the curvetting of the spirited animal putting the barley Londoners in some trepidation for their limbs, the form of Bertha's address to him passed unnoticed.

Among those most perilled by the prancing horse were the gentle Lucy and worthy Master Williams. In the confusion her hood fell back, and Leicester's quick eye catching a glimpse of a beautiful face, he condescended himself to express a hope that she was not hurt, having first sternly bade the officers proceed with the still screaming and sobbing convict.

"Oh, not hurt at all, please your Lordship's worshipful grace," said Master Williams; then he whispered to Lucy, "Say you are not hurt, my dear, say you are not hurt."

Lucy, who was quite as desirous to avoid the notice of Lord Leicester as her old friend could possibly desire, complied very readily with his injunction; but the Earl had now recognized her, and bending from his saddle, he said in a low tone—

"It may be, gentle maid, that you may find ere long a word from Lord Leicester may do much service to those whom you love. My door shall not be closed when you are a petitioner."

With these words he turned his horse's head towards St. Paul's, and galloped away, followed by his gaily-attired attendants. The hurdle upon which the miserable Bertha was conveyed to her doom was already out of sight, and that portion of the mob which had been hitherto engaged gazing at Lord Leicester and his splendid equipments now hastened to follow the rest towards Tyburn.

It was at this moment, when the Chepe was comparatively deserted, that two men approached Lucy and her old friend. In one of these she knew the young Warden of the City Watch, Edward Wood, and the cloaked and large cloak could not screen Henry Willoughton from her.

"You have played me false, love," she said, as he took her arm while she turned in the direction which Lord Leicester had taken.

"Pardon me, mine own sweet love," said Henry, "but I could not resolve to trust you in the dangerous streets of this city with no other protector than our worthy Master Williams."

"Yet, Henry, at what fearful peril to yourself are you abroad?" she said.

"Fear not, dearest," he answered, "none will know me thus disguised."

"But, Henry, you would not sure go with us to Whitehall?"

"Truly, fair damsel, where thou goest I must follow."

"Fear not, Mistress Lucy," said the Warden, "the crowd about the palace will be too much occupied with prisoners to notice Master Willoughton. I am going thither myself, and I think he may venture in our company."

"In sooth, Master Harry," said the little tailor, "I am right glad of thy coming, I liked not the looks of my Lord of Leicester at thy fair Lucy. Oh, he is an ogre, that proud Lord, a roaring lion, seeking out maidens to devour."

The matter being thus settled, the party hastened towards the Strand. It may here be observed that not long after Lucy had so happily met her lover in his house at Charing, the tailor, Master Williams, had arrived there; to Charing he was indeed hastening, when he spoke to Lucy in the street. Every day since the concealment of Willoughton in his subterranean dwelling, he had been visited by this eccentric but kind creature, who not only had supplied him with food and other necessities in his retreat, but had, in conjunction with Edward Wood, carefully collected and detailed to him as much of the gossip of the day as seemed at all to bear upon the fate of John Harding and his brother-in-law, Fenton. Of Gertrude, no more was known in London than that she had escaped. Her father and her uncle thus in prison, and her cousin fled, no one knew where, Lucy had but little to urge against the arguments of her lover when he implored her to divide with him his retreat, which, as it had hitherto been, would no doubt remain secure. When, however, the tailor mentioned that examination which was to take place at Whitehall, and that some persons condemned as connected with the rising were to be the next day executed at Tyburn, no entreaties of Henry could either dissuade Lucy from attempting to see those prisoners, or win her consent that she should accompany them upon an expedition so hazardous. Wearing by her importunities, she at last consented to trust herself to the escort only of Master Williams, but no sooner had she calculated that they were well through the village of Charing, than in defiance of every danger, to himself he left the house to follow them. On reaching Whitehall,

Lucy and her companions found an immense crowd there assembled. The chief prisoners, they heard it said, had not yet been brought from the Tower; but that some of her delinquents were even then under the examination of the Council; the names of the prisoners had not yet transpired. A violent crush of the people, soon after the arrival at Whitehall of Lucy and her friends, announced the approach of the prisoners. They were surrounded by a strong body of guards, but as in the case of Bertha, Lucy, by her position in front of the crowd was enabled to obtain a distinct view of their persons. But what was her emotion when she beheld, conducted first, distinguished by a mournful precedence, her wounded companion in the cottage of Cicely, the gentle, the romantic Hubert. After him were led five or six other gentlemen, among whom she recognized his friend Layton, and the procession was closed by poor Walter and his wife.

Lucy pressed the hand of her lover, but amid that crowd she did not dare to intimate the discovery which she had made; all she could venture was to implore him to remain at the palace gates till the examination should be past.

CHAPTER XVI.

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But what meanwhile was passing in the council chamber? Elizabeth herself was there with her favorite counsellors. Lord Morden, too, though not a member of the council sat at a little table behind Cecil's chair, and was occasionally directed by him to make a note of the proceedings.

By one of those incongruities for which it is so difficult to account, this frank and generous young nobleman was a favorite with the wily Burlough. It might be that Cecil felt that his cause required the support of some few such winning spirits, men whose hearts were not like his own, worn within the brain.

At that moment stood before the council two old men. One appeared convulsed with terror and grief; his hands were locked in each other, and when he spoke the faint sound of his voice was scarce distinguishable.

"Have you no more to say, Richard Fenton, in your defence?" demanded Sir Francis Walsingham of the old man.

"Alas, honorable sir, no more," replied the goldsmith. "May heaven be my witness that I harbored no thought of treason against her Grace. Alas! the heart that was half-broken by the loss of a beloved and only child, was no abiding place for treasonous plots. I think it were hard to bring proof of treason against me, the gibbet, if I am condemned to it, will but a little shorten those days which sorrow for my child, more than age, has already numbered."

"And what say you, John Harding?" said the Secretary, turning to the other prisoner. "You have been convicted of holding converse with the traitor, Leonard Dacre of Gilsland, now in arms against the sacred authority of her Grace; it may be well believed that you were aware of his projected treason. It is known that your daughter, the damsel Gertrude, visited the foreigner Vitelli; and that she was the bearer of some missive from Leonard, admits of no doubt; for we have it on the confession of Rudolph, that he had been employed as an agent to introduce into England arms and ammunition wherewith to aid the traitorous Dacre. How much of this charge does thy innocence or audacity prepare thee to deny?"

The hardship of imprisonment had not worn down John Harding to that desititution of mind and body which was exhibited by his brother-in-law. He stood before the council fully surmising, and with a spirit nerved to brook all the severity of the extreme sentence which he doubted not that they would pass. He acknowledged his communion with Leonard Dacre, and that his daughter had indeed visited Vitelli; but neither of these circumstances, he said, unsupported by other facts, could convict him of treason against her Grace.

"Insolent traitor!" said Elizabeth, "dost thou dare to palter with us. On what errand was it that this infamous daughter visited Vitelli? Speak, traitor, or we will have thee presently on the rack."

"It needs not, royal lady," said the merchant, raising still clear, blue eyes to the face of the Queen, with calmness which did but exasperate her already boiling rage. "It needs not," he repeated, "my child did indeed bear a letter to the ambassador."

"This to our face!" screamed Elizabeth; then she added with a bitter oath, "Oh, that we had the traitors in our power, she should die by inches, we would tear her limb meal ourselves."

"May it please your Grace," said John Harding, with imprudent courage, "had it not been for the heroism even of that humble damsel, your own royal life had not been spared for the execution of such a threat."

Elizabeth at this rejoinder fell back in her seat, actually dumb with astonishment and wrath; her lips trembled, and her eyes glared at the merchant as if she were really in doubt as to his words. At length her fury found a tongue, she turned upon Cecil with a torrent of imprecations.

"Dolt, villain, miscreant!" were the mildest epithets she used. "And this, too," she said, "is the fellow to whom thou wouldst have us show our royal mercy!"

"It were mercy, indeed, unfittingly bestowed," remarked Leicester, who sat as usual at her elbow. A bitter smile crossed the lip of Harding as the Earl thus spoke.

"Oh, oh, but he shall have mercy too," said Elizabeth. "We would not be in debt to his child; and he shall have his life at your hands. We doubt not she has joined the traitors in the north; and let him seek her valorous company. Albeit we will not leave him in our debt. See you, Sir Francis, that all his wealth is made confiscate to us. Then 'tis our royal command that he be scourged from Chipping to the Charing Cross, and branded as a traitor on the brow. Let him then go and seek his gallant daughter. Away with him, and for his companion, who seems more fool than traitor, after all, let him be put to prison, but let his mistress separately, there, in but little harm to him, we think."

This order of the Queen was immediately obeyed.

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but instead of being led to an immediate execution of their sentence, John Harding and his brother-in-law were conducted to an ante-chamber of the palace, there to remain until after the examination of the other prisoners.

The faded haired young man whom Lucy had known by the name of Hubert, was first conducted, with the gentlemen his fellow prisoners, before the council, Cicely and her husband being detained in another room.

The youth, Hubert, had previously been examined at the Tower, when, from the observation now addressed to him by Walsingham, it appeared that he had denied his guilt. As he was now led towards the table, the Secretary took from it the roll of names, the silver crucifix which Gertrude had found in the house inhabited by Vitelli.

"Now, traitor," he exclaimed, "wilt thou deny thy treason more. This Popish symbol has been sworn to as thy property. It was found by a servant of Lord Leicester's in that house where the Italian Vitelli dwelt. The ciphered scroll which it contained, and which so audaciously proposed to the Scottish Queen the murder of her beneficent and royal sister accords with those other treasonable papers which are already in our hands. Anthony Babington, wilt thou longer deny thy guilt?"

The sudden nature of this charge, the undoubted and present proof, startled the misguided and unfortunate youth.

"There was but one," he faltered, "but one among the ministers of your usurped authority who met me in that fatal house, and how he obtained access to it I know not." As he spoke thus, the eye of the young man rested on the face of the Earl of Leicester.

"Weak youth," exclaimed Cecil, "know that the engines of our power are alike countless and unseen. We know that the old house in Blackfriars had many a secret lurking place; and from the hour even that it was hired by thy friend Mancini for the dwelling of his master—from that hour was the piercing eye of justice fixed upon thee and upon thy movements. Nay, we know thee likewise for the assassin who sought the sacred life of Her Highness. Rememberest thou, when dripping and bewildered thou didst rest thy guilty head in the lone chamber of that house?"

"Aye!" replied Babington, "and the knife of the assassin that shone even amid the gloom. Who, then, was the spy that threw me bleeding, and as he thought dead beneath the vaults of that house?"

"That spy" said Leicester, "was a righteous servant of mine own—one who would fain walk in the way of the Lord; nor did he leave thee, traitor, in the vault but to seek assistance to bear thee to that prison which was thy only fitting habitation; but it mattered not that thine evil associates had removed thee ere his return, for the twig was already limed which was to ensnare thee. Even from thine own trusted associate did we gain a knowledge of thy retreat."

"From Mancini?" exclaimed Babington. "Ah, let me see him, and shame for his treachery shall kill him as he looks on that friend whom he has betrayed."

"It may not be," replied Walsingham; "that youth was seized when preparing to set out for Italy after his master, Vitelli, and he died but two days since upon the rack."

"All is lost, then," said Babington, with the fire of his incipient insanity flashing wildly in his large blue eyes; then turning to the Queen, who had hitherto listened to his examination in intense and silent interest, he exclaimed—

"Yes, tigress of the west; I would indeed have slain thee, had it so been willed, for thy death would have been the life of many; but the task is vouchsafed to a wrothier hand."

"Bear hence the traitor!" cried Elizabeth.

But as Babington was dragged from the apartment he looked towards his companions who were left behind.

"Poor friends, poor friends," he said, "tis but for thee I mourn."

The other prisoners were now examined, and the youth whom Lord Dacre had encountered on his journey to Tutbury, and who had visited Babington in his retreat at the cottage, was arraigned by the name of Tichborne. As Lord Dacre had suspected he had been betrayed by Giffard. The letter which he had conveyed to Mary had been sent by that traitor to Walsingham, to whom also the reply of the Queen had been submitted ere it was suffered to reach the hands of the confederates. It was by such artifices that the Secretary obtained that opportunity of interpolating the letters of the captive, which afterwards supplied him with a pretext on which to implicate her with a darker portion of Babington's conspiracy—that portion which aimed at the life of Elizabeth.

The unfortunate Tichborne denied all intent to take the life of the Queen, admitting that he had designed to liberate Mary; but even into that attempt he said he had been led by what he could not but consider an innocent compassion for the sufferings of that Princess and his warm friendship for Babington.

When the wretched prisoner had all been conveyed out of the council chamber, the Queen turned to Cecil, and observing that a trial must certainly convict them, swore that they should have other than the common punishment for traitors—"to be hanged and quartered were too light a doom."

"May it please your Grace," said Cecil, hesitatingly, "it were not well to interfere with the common course of the law, which has ever been held in such a case to impose a penalty severe enough."

"How say you, Sir Francis?" then inquired the Queen of Walsingham.

"Even with my sage colleague, gracious Madam," replied the Secretary. "It were neither wise nor just to depart from the customary sentence of the law upon this occasion."

"So then let it be," said the Queen; "but see that there be no false mercy shown the villains in the execution of that law, by which our wise counsellors have such a dainty desire to abide. Such penance as the law imposes shall be protracted in their case, even to the extremity of pain; and in full sight of the people, too, let them have notice of what their fate is, and let them see that the law is but a mockery."

Cicely and her husband were next examined. The woman appeared to have been Babington's nurse.

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but as it seemed that they had given him shelter without having any knowledge of his conspiracy, they were simply committed to prison until after his trial.

Poor Lucy meanwhile had suffered the most torturing anxiety till the reappearance of the prisoners; nor were the exclamations of the mob in any way calculated to relieve her apprehensions, the emissaries of the Government having been for the last few weeks busily employed in exciting all possible horror of the Papists and their plots; hence a thousand bitter execrations against the professors of her own faith were poured into her startled ears. But when the prisoners were again led from the palace, and it was understood that they were to be tried in a few days, then it was that the frenzy of the popular feeling arose to its height, and the officers had some difficulty in defending their charge. Lucy saw the wretched Babington and his associates, and heard their real names; she perceived, too, the woestricken countenance of Cicely, absorbed in grief for the coming doom of her foster son. But after those prisoners were led John Harding and Richard Fenton, and the spirits of Lucy, weakened both by anxiety and illness, at once failed when she beheld her beloved father and uncle. She did not even hear those whispers among the crowd which told the nature of their doom, but, uttering a deep sigh, sunk senseless in her lover's arms.

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