

Stephen looked with amazement at the man confronting him. "May it please your Majesty," he stammered, "it is Master Arnold Firle, cousin of my lord the Earl of Vane."

"And where is the Earl of Vane?"

"Indeed, may it please your Majesty, I do not know," said Stephen. "It is said he fled the country, taking with him the Countess." The honest fellow's legs were shaking under him.

"Tell the King's Grace all, Stephen," said Arnold. "The blame was mine who tricked you, and His Majesty will lay it on my shoulders."

"The whole truth is," said Stephen, "that I helped Master Arnold to save the Earl and the Countess, but I swear, may it please your Majesty's worshipful Grace, by all holy things, that I knew not who it was I saved until it was too late not to save them."

Charles shrugged his shoulders and dismissed the frightened innkeeper with a wave of his hand. "And now present me to your Countess, my lord, and with your leave let us be getting to dinner," said he to Arnold's glad astonishment. "Gad, the air of your southern hills gives an emptiness we would gladly buy with gold at Whitehall."

Arnold turned and beckoned to Franklin the steward, and in another moment the guards and gentlemen made a passage through which the young Countess approached the royal carriage. As she came past the staring men the colour heightened in her cheeks, but her step was firm and free, and her shining brown eyes watched her husband and the King.

Charles gazed with a quickening interest, and as she curtsied low at the carriage step he smiled graciously and bowed. Here was a beauty unlike the beauties of his Court.

"Madam," said he, "this fortunate gentleman is your husband, I am told."