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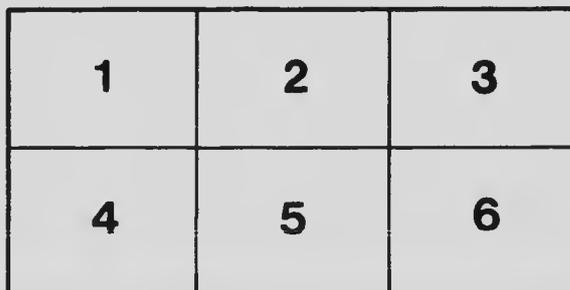
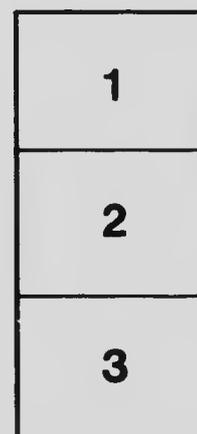
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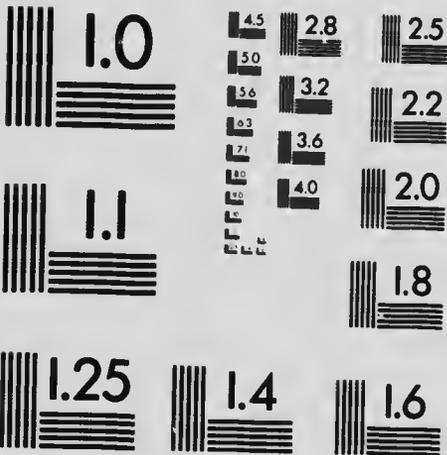
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Flower o' the Orange



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FLOWER O' THE ORANGE

AND OTHER STORIES

BY

AGNES & EGERTON CASTLE

AUTHORS OF "ROSE OF THE WORLD"

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TO OUR FRIEND
ROYAL CORTISSOZ

January, 1908



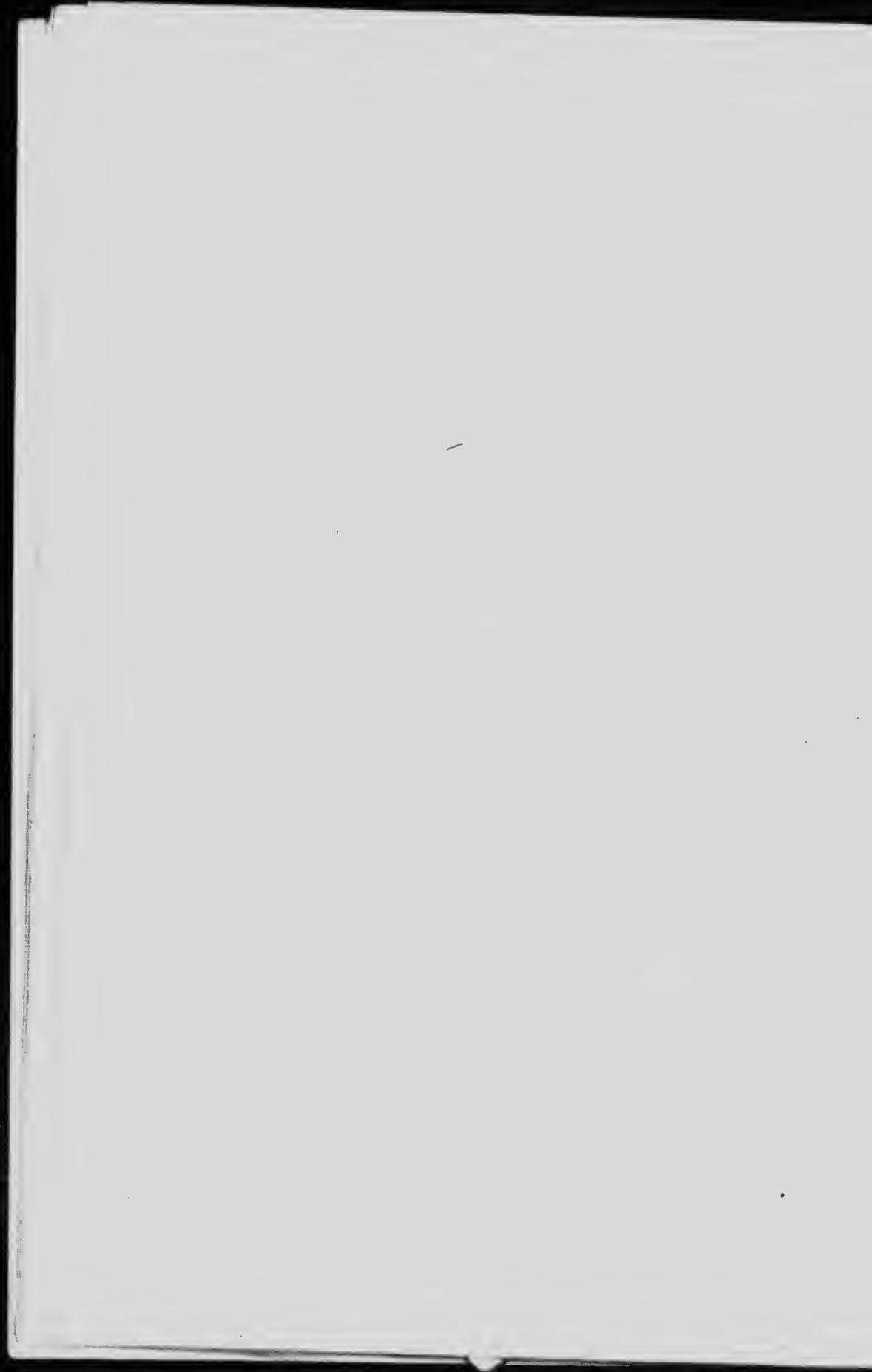
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FLOWER O' THE ORANGE



I

FLOWER O' THE ORANGE

PERCHED high upon the southernmost headland of Galloway; looking down on the one side sheer from the lip of the cliff upon the foaming fringe of Luce Bay, and on the other upon the gently-sloping green lands of woods and fat meadows, stands Eager-ness.

The ancestral home of the Carmichaels is one of those buildings peculiar to Scotland, which bears the impress of every period of national history. Its foundations rest within the forgotten mounds of camps once Pictish, later Roman; the thick, tall, square Peel, noted landmark to all sailers into Solway Firth, still rises, but for the ivy of its walls and its roof of more civilised contrivance, much as it did while the middle ages and subsequent warlike centuries rolled by.

Around this frowning pile, with the growth of modern security, has likewise grown the comfort of modern dwellings. The compact stronghouse has expanded into the mansion; the jealously cleared and well-watched approaches have drifted from the warder's care to that of the landscape gardener, have become luxuriant with tall timber, with varied under-wood. Outlying walls enclose high-tended gardens,

FLOWER O' THE ORANGE

and support exotic wall fruit. And now, old and newer alike, everything about Eagerness has once more assumed the mellowness of wealthy age.

From the topmost platform of the keep the view is immense. When the sun is sinking, the Cumbrian ranges stand out purple against the distant eastern skies; while to the south, Man, an island of amethyst, melts away in a sea of grey silver. At the early hours, when the rays are still level and cold, the heights of the far Irish shore show faintly, steel blue, to the west. And to the north, away beyond the rich coast land, but almost at hand it would seem, stretch the grey hills of Galloway in all their Scottish grimness. In a fine light the eye, in fact, can reach across the marches of three kingdoms. And as he gazes over the proud view, the watcher can tell himself that in the receding ages the blood of the masters of Eagerness had flowed in the veins of many a ruler of those fair lands; and that, in these days of peace—for times will change and men with them—wealth and influence and wide connection yet maintain the name of Carmichael as high in men's minds as did their strong deeds of yore.

Many strange scenes have, in the course of ages, taken place under the tall roofs of Eagerness—scenes of brutality, no doubt, often enough, or of cunning; of triumph or tragedy for the race; sometimes of happiness.

Not always among the most strenuous, however, are the scenes which prove the opening of a new drama in the family fortunes. In a fashion homely enough began such a one at the close of a boisterous March day in the year '16 of the last century. It was in a turret-room midway up the old Peel—once

keeping-chamber of the castellans, now (in respect of its situation, which is well out of the way of modern apartments) devoted to nursery uses.

I

Old Meg, the housekeeper, and Mrs. Adams, the grand English nurse, stood facing each other in one of those pauses which in the heart of a storm precede the fiercer outbreak. Between them the heir of Eagerness kept up his persistent cry :

“Want Mary-Nan !”

The bellow that had brought Meg Drummond a-canter to the nursery had given place, at sight of an ally, to a plaintive wail—“a wail” (as she subsequently remarked) “that would have melted a heart of stone.”

But the person in authority stood firm alike against genteel remonstrance and infantile sorrow, and after the lull the gathering forces rushed into fresh collision.

“And, indeed, Mistress Adams,” old Meg was saying, “I’m no one for interfering, as I think you’ll do me the credit of conceding, these four weary years that we’ve been together at Eagerness—hoping I ken my duty to my master and her auld leddyship who set ye in your place——” Indescribably but unmistakably did Meg convey how ill she deemed that place filled. “But, seeing that I nursed his father, aye, and served his grandfather before him, I canna stand by and see harm done to the bairn. It’s no richt, Mistress Adams, mem, to gar him greet that gate. ’Tis not for his health; ye’ll be having him sicken, and ony day his father might be stepping in upon us.—Whisht, me lammie ! we’ll have her up till

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ye in a minute, so you'll be a gude laddie and take your suppie milk!"

The sniffs, loud and prolonged, with which the nurse had commented on the housekeeper's discourse, now gave place to grating accents, sharply bitten off, as it were, by lips that had as much capacity for tenderness in them as a steel trap. A gaunt, flat-chested woman, with long face, framed by sleek bands of unnaturally black hair, with goffered cap and apron repellent in starchy whiteness—such was the nurse whom Lady Ishbel Carmichael had selected for the supreme charge of her little grandson.

Old Meg, who was of the well-cushioned type of womanhood herself, yearning to a child with a kind of melting greed, had very clear ideas as to whom Eagerness's mother should have confided Eagerness's son. "But God forgie her," she would say, with a shake of her white curls, "she canna forget in the bairn the mither that bore him. Aye, he has his mither's eyes, and the auld leddy could never bring herself to take him to her bosom. 'But I'll do my duty by him,' says she to me."

The dowager's sense of duty had taken the unpleasant form of Mrs. Adams: a disciplinarian of the most rigid Christian character and the highest testimonials. With this worthy, old Meg strove honestly to keep on the most polite, curtseying terms. But, as on the present occasion, not infrequent were the lapses in which, warm heart getting the better of decorum, she was fain to make a whirlwind ascent into nursery regions and to speak her mind—efforts invariably marked by conspicuous failure.

The steel trap now snapped out its views on infant education:

"Begging your pardon, Mrs. Drummond, I must again request you not to infringe my rules by visiting Master Carmichael at bedtime. Master Carmichael has been very unruly. I have repeatedly informed him that I cannot permit Miss Mackenzie to come to the nursery to-night or indeed at any other time."

"Want Mary-Nan!" broke in Master Carmichael, shaking the sides of his cot with little fierce hands.

"I shall have to chastise you a second time, sir," said Mrs. Adams dispassionately.

She approached him with the bowl of hot milk in one hand and with the other forcibly turned the curly head. There was a struggle, a shout, an earthquake among the bedclothes; the bowl rolled in one direction, most of the milk ran streaming down Mrs. Adams' aggressive apron, and Master Carmichael's howls were triumphant and desperate as befitted one who in victory had sealed his doom.

The nurse removed her apron. Her hands shook a little, but the grey face betrayed no emotion. Then she advanced upon the cot. Old Meg, in great agitation, interposed her stout form.

"Nay, Mistress Adams, not in my presence, mem! I'll no have a finger laid on the blessed child the day. Shame on ye, to call yourself a wumman! If he had the spirits of twenty, ye'd break them all!—Whisht, my lamb!"

The lamb, with the cunning of his kind, clung to the ample bosom. "Want Mary-Nan!"

"Give me that child, Mrs. Drummond," said the nurse with deadly self-control. She laid her grasp on the dimpled wrist.

Young Eagerness had good lungs; he filled them now with a mighty breath and mightily expended it.

FLOWER O' THE ORANGE

"Hech, but ye're an awful wumman!" cried the flustered Meg. The two were struggling for the child.

The door opened. A tall man strode into the room and stood looking at them. At the sound of his steps there was dead silence. Even the babe ceased his outcry to fix round, wet eyes on the stranger.

"Lord be gude to us! 'Tis Eagerness himself!"

Meg stared a second or two helplessly at the gaunt figure in the high boots, the furred travelling cloak. Eagerness! But, merciful heavens, how these four years had changed him, her bonny lad! How dour and dark he looked, glowering at her from under his bent brows!

They had not met since the dreadful night when the lady of Eagerness, frail, false wife, had deserted husband and babe. And here was the wee creature with a head of curls sunning all over, just like to hers—the poor foolish young thing—his eyes, his mother's own blue, and the very mouth of her, parted, appealing: many a time had she looked at those that chid her with just such a droop of the lip.

Mistress Drummond had not even sufficient presence of mind to curtsy. She hesitated, helpless, still clutching the sweet, warm burden. She longed to place it in the father's arms; but courage failed her, for she read memory in that brooding gaze. And so, at last, miserably, she put the child back in its cot and, still keeping cautiously between it and the disciplinarian, quavered her greeting:

"Lord sakes, Eagerness, and is it yourself?"

Her heart was sore. The master's home-coming—the hour she had dreamed of night and day through the lonely, empty years—to have it thus!

Exiled from the comfort of her embrace, Ronald

of the copper curls and the blue eyes lost his interest in the new arrival and began to reflect on his own woes again. The gaze of Mrs. Adams had a threatening glitter as it roamed towards him. To his infant perspicacity it assured him, more distinctly than words, that what is postponed is not forgotten. And he wanted his Mary-Nan!

Simon Carmichael of Eagerness had eyes of the colour of one of his own burns, under rugged, frowning brows. There was something not unkind, not unhumorous in them, for those who could see beyond the frown. His glance moved quickly now from his old servant's quivering countenance to Mrs. Adams' visage which wore a granite triumph, like to some bleak Covenantanter's monument, testifying to relentless virtue. Then he looked at his child and then at Meg once more:

"How now, you auld witch! And haven't you a better welcome for me?"

The voice was harsh. There was no relaxation about the melancholy mouth. But Meg knew her master. Her heart leapt, tears sprang out upon her apple cheeks:

"Hech, Eagerness—hech, my bonny man!"

She could utter no further word; she was too full of woe for him, minding all that had been, and too fain to see him again.

"Fighting, screeching, scratching like a pair of auld tabbies! Sic a hurdy-gurdy!"

He took a step up to her, and the next instant she was weeping on his hand, clasping it in both her own.

"Tush! You're nought but a fool!" said he. He turned his eyes upon the child, who was now reduced to the hoarse whine of exhaustion. "And so yon's

my bairn, Meg." His voice had altered subtly, indescribably. Disengaging himself from her grasp, he stretched out a finger and touched the wet velvet of the babe's cheek. Little Eagerness clutched at the long finger with small fevered hands and was shaken by a gusty sob :

"Want Mary-Nan!"

The father made no response ; but, leaving his hand in the satin-soft grip—that, for all its fragility, told of a will as indomitable as his own—again addressed his housekeeper with rough good-nature, dropping as before into the familiarity of language and accent that was to her the most flattering of compliments :

"You'll have to bustle, old lady. I've brought a pack of fine gentlemen with me, and ye'll have to get them bite and bed or be clean disgraced ! Nay, never gorm at me that way ! There are sheep in the park, there's wine in the cellar. Aye, they are cracking a bottle or so in the library this minute and will be none too particular over the meat by-and-by. And I'll see to it that the heads that lie on your pillows to-night will never sniff if they be musty."

The tears dried under the fire that mounted to Mrs. Drummond's cheeks :

"Musty ! Gin ye brought home twenty gentlemen as grand as yourself, Eagerness, there'd be twenty beds fit for them the night. And, troth, did ye think when ye left me the head of a housefu' of servants all these years that I'd let them eat the bread of idleness ? There's a haunch in the larder below, aye and a saumon that the King has no better. Hech, sir, there's not a day since your flitting, and me not knowing but the next would bring you hame again, that your ain castle has not been kept ready for you

—reek in the chimney, broth in the pot. Aye, and the very orange trees thick with blossoms this verra day!”

No sooner had she said the last words than she could have bitten her tongue out, remembering for whom the orangery had been built.

“Mary-Nan,” hiccoughed young Eagernesse.

“Be silent, Master Carmichael!” commanded Mrs. Adams.

She had been awaiting the master's recognition with her air of unyielding rectitude. She knew the story of his house, knew for what qualities the bitter grandmother had chosen her among a hundred—what evil taint was to be driven from the little heir even with stripes. It was high time, indeed—she smoothed the prickly, black mohair skirt where the apron should have spread—that a man's hand should be wielded upon the wilful boy.

“I am sorry to say, sir, that Master Carmichael has been very disobedient to-night, very obstinate and unsubmitive indeed.”

The elder Carmichael shot a swift, flashing glance at her out of his cairngorm eyes. Then he looked at the over-turned milk-bowl, at the white pool on the bare boards, and lastly at the bright-curled hot-cheeked criminal on the bed. The blue gaze looked up at him brimming over. The baby hands kept unflinching hold of his finger. Mrs. Drummond, on her way about her household business, paused at the door, shaking in her shoes. The master had grown a dreadful dour-looking man.

“And what is Mary-Nan?” he asked, suddenly and sharply.

Both women answered together:

“And, indeed, the puir bairn's just daft after her——”

"She has a most deplorable influence upon Master Carmichael——"

"She's a verra gude kind young leddie, just the daughter of the meenister——"

"I should not be doing my duty, Mr. Carmichael, sir, conformable to Lady Ishbel's instructions——"

"She comes up whiles to have a crack with me."

"Master Carmichael's passionate and rebellious nature demands the strictest discipline." The nurse's measured tones outstayed old Meg's fluttered volubility. "I have informed Master Carmichael of my decision to prohibit any further intercourse between him and Miss Mackenzie, and he has shown very evil tempers, hearing she was in the house." Her eye, with its menace, fixed itself upon the child. "I have already chastised him for his passion to-day, and have had to tell him that I shall repeat the chastisement presently."

Here Eagerness's finger was nipped and wrung; but in the roar that burst from the accused, he was aware more of thwarted fury than of fear.

"Where is this girl—this Mary-Nan?"

Housekeeper and nurse stared at him, both striving in vain to read the impassive face. Then Mrs. Adams tossed her head victoriously. The peremptory voice augured well in her ears. Certain people should be taught their place at last. But old Meg glanced at the patient, extended finger and took heart of grace.

"She's in the house the noo!" she cried eagerly.

Equally rejoiced were the belligerents over the immediate order:

"Send her up."

While they waited the nurse dilated at some length on her educational system, drawn out by abrupt

questions. She was becoming, for her, quite genial, when the nursery door burst open and a girl with a tartan shawl hanging off her shoulders, rushed in upon them, panting as she ran.

"Oh, Mary-Nan, my Mary-Nan!" cried the child.

It was so rapturous, at the same time so pitiful a call, that old Meg, toiling up the corkscrew stair after the girl, was struck to the heart.

Little Eagerness let go his father's finger to stretch out his arms. Neither he nor the new-comer had eyes but for each other. She came straight to him with long swift steps, and culled him to her breast. He gave a wriggle of comfort and content ineffable, and patting her cheeks began to pour forth, in his incomplete language, a tale of woe and misdeeds, the while she cooed and crooned over him like some large, soft mother-bird.

"My wee cummie, my bonny wee man!"

"She beated me with her slipper—I frowed my milk on the floor!"

"Ah, but that was wrong of my bonny dove! How will sweet boys grow strong and big if they winna drink their suppie—suppie—suppie!" And kisses well-nigh between every word—soft, open-mouthed, wet-lipped on the babe's part, close and sweet and greedy on hers.

Mrs. Adams folded her arms.

"You see, Mr. Carmichael, sir," she said, exulting. "You see for yourself my reasons for excluding Miss Mackenzie from Master Carmichael's society."

There was a tight smile on her face. She felt very sure of her ground; the father, she knew, had not borne to look upon his son for four years, and the Lady Ishbel's instructions had been very precise.

Eagerness started from the abstraction, during which he had been gazing at the girl, and slowly moved his eyes until they rested on the speaker. Then he flung out his hand, long finger still extended :

"As for you—pack!"

Mrs. Adams could not credit her ears.

"Pack, I say! Out of my house this night! Pack and go."

"Sir—Mr. Carmichael——" She turned a livid face, defiant. She knew her rights.

He strode upon her; it was enough. She quailed, shrank; her steel became mere rag. Whining, she supplicated—a few days' grace—till the morning!

"Not an hour." He came closer as she retreated. "Meg'll see to your money. Out, neck and crop!"

On the threshold she made a last cringing halt. The dear child, who should care for it that night?

"Mary-Nan," said Eagerness, and slammed the door on the long sinister visage.

Then he turned round, folded his arms, looked at the two, and was shaken with sudden, silent laughter.

Mary-Nan was gazing at him over the curly head; and as their glances commingled the colour rose to her face, even to the roots of her glorious black hair. A cheek like an apricot she had, the eyes of a fawn, a column of amber throat, a crisp wave of locks round a head shaped like that of some Greek statue. She held his heavy child against her bosom with the ease of perfect strength. Wonder grew as he looked.

Ronald, worn out by his mighty battle, still shaken with reminiscent sighs, drooped against her, cuddled, and fell asleep. Instinctively she began to rock him, as she stood, patting the dimpled arm:

"You did verra weel, sir," she said. "She was a wicked woman yon, and cruel to the puir laddie."

He made an abrupt gesture. Gone was the vile hag from his thought; more interesting matter was before him.

"In God's name, and where do you spring from?"

"From the manse below, at Monreith."

"Good heavens!"

Aye, she explained, the minister, Mr. Mackenzie, was her father. They had been here a few years now, and they liked it very well.

"And your name is Mary Anne Mackenzie?"

She corrected him with a smile. She had beautiful lips, richly cut and of a noble crimson to fit the smooth amber of her skin:

"Maria-Annunziata Mackenzie."

He laughed again; his quick, silent laughter that seemed but to shake him, in his melancholy for the humour, but never for the mirth of things.

"Maria-Annunziata — and to that, Mackenzie! Maria-Annunziata, and you a daughter of the Kirk, of the purified Kirk of Scotland!"

"My mother was of Italy," she went on composedly, rocking and patting, with ever and anon a maternal glance at the nestling head between her full frank looks at him. Each time she lowered her lids he marvelled at the black lashes sweeping her cheeks.

"My mother was of Italy," she repeated. "Aye, sir, my father wedded her out of pity, one may say, she being a castaway from the wreck of a foreign ship, and all lost but her. Some folks said the ship sailed from Genoa, for the cases of oranges that the waves kept flinging upon the beach; but no one

rightly kenned. And she had not a word of any language but her own. My father scarce knew aught but that she was a puir desolate lass, and that her name was Maria-Annunziata. Folks telled me," she went on, unconsciously dropping her voice to a lilting rhythm to accompany her rocking of the child, "that she never was as ither folk after the shock and the hardship. But my father loved her dear, and she died when I was born. That was in the other parish where we lived, near Arbroath by the sea."

She told her tale with a grave simplicity that seemed to rob her of all embarrassment before the great lord of the land. Her voice had a low music, deeper than most women's; indeed, there was in her whole being a mellowness as of other suns, a warmth, a generosity, an unconscious freedom.

"Ha," he cried, "I might have known, by the mere look of you, that such a flower o' the orange could bloom in our barren land but by a freak of fate!"

"In Heaven's name, Eagerness," said old Meg, creaking open the door, "the gentlemen are wild for you in the library, and I maun have an hour's grace to get their fires up."

"I'm coming, — them!" said Eagerness genially.

He drew close to Maria-Annunziata as he spoke, and once more laid his finger lightly on his child's cheek. Then, without word or look for the girl, he marched to the door. On the threshold, however, he paused and nodded at her.

"You will mind him to-night," he said.

She started in dismayed protest:

"Hech, sir, but my father! I canna leave my father the night."

"Tush! Your father shall be warned. You'll bide." The door was closed upon her further objection.

Left alone, old Meg and Mary-Nan gazed at each other.

"You maun bide," said the housekeeper.

"And, indeed, Mistress Drummond, I canna. If 'twas to save the bairnie from yon dreadful wumman, I'd stay and gladly. But he'll be safe wi' you; and my auld hinnie will take neither bite nor sup this evening without me."

"You maun bide," repeated Meg. "Eh, you little ken Eagerness! He's no to be thwarted, that gate. Hech, lass, he's master here, and the meenister himself would no wish to misplease him, the very nicht of his hame-coming after a' the sair years; he that holds us all, as one may say, in the hollow of his hand! Me watch the bairn? I darena, Mary-Nan, that's the truth. Did ye catch his eye upon me as he went out? His order's given—Tut, tut, hark to that now!" The girl had endeavoured to slip the child into his cot again. He woke, clung about her neck, and set up a drowsy cry. "You'll have him roaring again, Mary, lass. Aye, he may have his mother's een and his mother's hair, but he has his father's wull, and the pair of them will not let you hame the nicht! Besides, I have ower muckle to look after. You maun bide, there's my douce lassie."

"Why, if I maun, I maun," said Maria-Annunziata placidly. She bent over the cot, soothing the little tyrant. Then, suddenly looking up:

"He never so much as kissed the laddie," she said.

Old Meg hesitated at the door. Various duties were calling her hence, urgently enough; yet she

loved a bit of gossip dearly, and here was the one being worthy of her confidence.

"Eh, Mary-Nan"—she came back, her voice dropped to an important whisper. "They're a strange race, the Carmichaels, and him the strangest of them all! I tell you, even I who nursed him, many a time my mind has misgiven me as to whether he'd ever bear the sight of his child, sith it's got the image stamped on it of the puir thing that's gone. Troth, I could have dropped as I saw him standing there, a while ago, looking at the wean; but he's a father's heart in him, richt eneuch—did you mind him waiting by the cot with his finger in the wee hand, so patient? It did my old een guid to see. I was without, in the passage, ye ken. Aye, and to hear him turn on yon awfu' English woman! 'Pack!' says he."

As Meg rambled on, the girl drew a stool by the cot and sat, her long hand, delicately golden against the white quilt, patting the sleeping child in a knowing way, though her eyes were fixed and abstracted. The shadows were growing deep in the great bare tower room; and a ghostly greyness was beginning to settle about the familiar objects.

"He seems a dour, wilful gentleman indeed—yet I wonder how she could have left him."

"Is it the Lady Liliass ye mean? Whisht, Mary-Nan, it is a fearsome thing to be speaking of her, and him in the house! Ah, lassie, when I think of the night she ran, and Eagerness's face when he kenned the news!"

"Did he love her so much?" murmured Maria-Annunziata. "Hech! How could she have the heart?"

"Love! Aweel, I couldna tell ye. He would have let her walk on siller and gowd if she'd had a mind! Nothing was too good or too grand for her. Wench, the cedar presses in the great room below are full of her gowns this minute—braw silks and satins that would keep a family for life. And, ye mind the orangery, where ye be so fond of peeping into and sniffing the scent? That was built for a mere whimsey of hers. But love, lassie?—nay, there are whiles I think he never loved her, and that she knew it!"

"But she must have been bonny," said Mary-Nan, her chin in her hand, crouching on the creepie-stool. The glow of the peat fire played on her face. "She must have been bonny, since the bairn be so like her."

"Bonny? Aye, bonny she was! But it was the pride of the auld leddie that made the match, and sic matches are not made in heaven. Lady Ishbel was set on it in the upliftedness of her heart. 'A' the Carmichaels,' says she, 'have wedded with dukes' daughters since Colum Carmichael of Otterburn—and he chose the daughter of a king!' Weel, weel, their pride was sune laid low, for within the twa year the Lady Liliass had runned wi' a mad cousin of her own—just hame that week from the Indies! And her name never to be spoken again but wi' bated breath for the shame on it."

"And where did she die?" asked the girl, dropping her voice.

"Far away from her ain country—in some foreign place—aye, it was Germany, as I heard tell. And some say 'twas of fretting after the man and bairn she had left. But I've heerd a queer tale, of how yon ithar—the callant she was led away by, ye ken

—was but a cauld, black-hearted traitor to her after a'—how he sune tired of her and left her wi'out freend or money, in a strange land, her ain having cast her off. Whilk the laird, having tracked him across the seas, brought him by the ear, they say, as you bring a cur-dog—to the puir place she was sheltered in. And then in the garden, beneath her very windows, he ran him through the body. If I ken Eagernesse, it was fair fecht but no mercy.

“And then, it being the night-time and the mune in the sky, he called her by name, till she ran and speered out. I'm thinking his voice, rising in her sleep, must have seemed like some awful spirit-call to her. But there, gin the tale be true, stood Eagernesse, flesh and bluid, with the wan light on his face—and him laughing to himself. (I've never heard him laugh out loud.) ‘My lady, come and see what I've made of your bonny lover. . . .’ Weel, they say, when she saw the two, the living and the dead, she gave a great shriek and fell. They pit her back in her bed, and she only left it for her coffin. Well, well, 'tis all as may be. From first to last, an ower-sad, ower-bitter business. The Leddy Ishbel, she came to see me afterwards, three years agone now. ‘Have ye heard the news, Meg?’ says she. ‘Yon's gone to her account,’ says she. ‘I havena had such sweet sleep this twal' months.’—God be wi' us, but I'm a daft old fule! You suldna be temptin' me to the gossip, lassie. And ne'er a one in this castle with a head on her shoulders but myself!”

She had bustled forth even as she spoke. Maria-Annunziata sat, still staring into the crumpling peat; the rhythmic breath of the child fell softly on her ear. High in the tower room no sound of the bustle

in the castle reached her ; naught but the wail of the wind rising about the walls, and the grinding of the surf on the rocks far below. They were terrible scenes, lurid with passion and violence, that she pictured for herself in the embers. And the centre of them was ever Eagerness, that strange, gaunt man, of the bent brows and the clear, melancholy eyes, with their stealthy gleam of kindness.

II

It was a curious company that Simon Carmichael had gathered round him that night ; partly for the carrying out of an irresponsible wager ; partly because of his determination that none should pity him for a sad home-coming.

From Edinburgh he had carried with him two boon companions of his younger days, together with a new acquaintance—all culled, as it were, from a single convivial meeting, on the mere gust of his mood. There was Lord Dunure—dashing member of the Regent's own circle, and well qualified for that exalted privilege—who could boast that he had wrenched off more knockers, disabled more watchmen, backed more prizefighters, than any other gentleman honoured with the Royal regard ; there was Sir Lucius Damory, would-be Mæcenas and would-be wit ; with him his latest *protégé*, Duncan Teague, a poet, reputed to have been a shepherd in Aberdeenshire till his rhymes brought him into fame and high circles—a small, squat, dark man this third, given to terrible passions of eloquence between pregnant hours of silence. And besides there was a hard-riding neighbouring laird, picked up *en route*, and a slim, smooth-cheeked boy, the Marquess of

Dumbarton, Eagerness's own cousin on the maternal side. The last was known as Dumb Dumbarton, because of his extraordinary taciturnity: a taciturnity his own neighbours estimated as in no way arising from the bashfulness of his years. "Ower proud to speak," they had it. He came from the far Highlands, arriving after the rest of the party, with quite a retinue of servants, including his piper. Mistress Drummond had taken special pains about his apartments; not so much because he was the grandest of her master's guests, as because "his hair had a bit curl in it, and her heart always went out to a laddie."

The great dining hall was filled with light and clamour. Servants ran hither and thither, poising the silver dishes; and the savoury reek of the feast mingled with the fragrance of the blossoms from the orangery that ran parallel to the hall. Each man had to his hand brimming glasses of wines, red, white, and amber; Burgundy, velvety, perfumed, potent; claret, subtle and insidious; champagne with the laughing bubble; Rhenish with its frosty sunshine. Tongues were loosened, merriment rippled.

The shepherd-poet beat the table and stormed a long speech in broad and picturesque tongue. Something it had to do with former existence and predestination, something with politics—a good deal with the speaker's conviction that one man was as good as another—in the present instance possibly better.

The company at first shouted and applauded, then became suddenly and irrevocably bored; until Eagerness, with hoarse gibe, drove the poor rhymester into a fit of fury, wherein he cursed and quoted fiercely from Ezekiel and from that chiel Burns; whereat laughter broke out once more round the

table. Damory poured claret on his satellite's wrath, and Dunure vowed it hissed as it ran down the hot throat; which idea striking the poetic mind, the shepherd yielded himself to one of his silences for the working of it to a lilt.

The moment came when smoking joint and pompous platter gave place to the less gross attractions of dessert. Four silver baskets, which had been of Eagerness's wedding gifts, gleamed in the candle-light under their burden of pine and grape and ruddy orange. The cut-glass decanters circled from hand to hand, casting a glow like jewels on the mahogany. It should have been the moment of highest mirth. The guests had drunk deeply, but, as times went, not too deeply. The fare had more than carried out Meg's boast, and vindicated her master's rash wager. Half a tree-bole was burning gloriously on the vast hearth, and the March wind was rising without. Each could picture to himself how the waves were leaping upon the wild coast, how the trees were bowing and writhing, and gladden his heart with the cheer and comfort within.

Yet, as they sat, there had fallen a gloom about the six men; a chill striking out, it seemed, from the host himself, and passed on with interest by haughty Dumbarton on his right. Damory lost the thread of his wittiest sentence, and Dunure yawned in the midst of a laugh; Rob Raeburn of Penninghame took affront, God knows why, all of a sudden at being set down to table with Teague, who had driven sheep. He strove to catch Eagerness's eye for the picking of a quarrel; but, having met it, was withered into a nameless fear and had to drink a glass of brandy before his blood warmed again. As

for Teague, he was scanning—his great thumb beating the table—but could not bring a rhyme, had he been hanged for it.

Dunure, by the left of Eagerness, struck him on the shoulder.

"For the Lord's sake, man, what's become of your boast? 'Tis not a funeral, I take it, you've convened us to."

Carmichael lifted his head.

"My lord," said he, "I claim to have won my wager. When ye were for pitying me at leaving the blithe cheer of the town for my rainshackle old sea-castle which I had not seen for so many years, I went warrant that I should find in it any day as good entertainment as we were sharing at the moment—aye, and better! Now these gentlemen will bear me out: has my venison been less savoury than that of old Destournaux's at the George? Or is it my wine that is not up to the standard of his cellar?—It was scarce in the bargain," he went on, with a black look, "that I should provide you with digestions to take comfort in my vivers, or with wits to sparkle after my bottles."

Lord Dunure was of a very different make from country-bred Penninghame. He resented his host's look and tone instantly. His light, dancing brown eyes fixed themselves in answering menace.

"Listen to Simon Carmichael!" he scoffed. "Does he not talk like an innkeeper, and a sullen one at that? Vivers and wine—his bottle, his venison!"

"If there is anything I can further provide for Lord Dunure's entertainment?" said Eagerness.

There was a threat in his voice like gathering thunder, the veins in his forehead swelled. Damory,

scenting the tedium of a quarrel, strove to turn the question with a joke, vowed the entertainment was unexceptionable, but the evening only just begun; called for a song and nudged Dumbarton to support him; whereat the latter, unostentatiously withdrawing from the touch, suggested (not without a jesting gleam in his blue eyes) that he could have his piper in, if any one cared.

— ere there rose a clamour; for Teague, standing up, proposed to gie the table a bit verse of his ain, verra divertin'; and Rob, whom the brandy had altogether befuddled, raised a steady roar for the piper. Into this hurly-burly Dunure, his red eye still on the host, slipped his dagger-thrust of words:

"Pshaw, friends, what we miss in this house is a lady's presence. Your wine's good enough, Eagerness, and so is your fare. But what's a man's castle without a lady in bower? Gad, man, we do lack a hostess."

"Say you so?" said Eagerness.

In the emphasising silence that at once surrounded them, both men smiled with dilated nostrils and unflinching stare upon each other. Then, unexpectedly, Carmichael laughed in his noiseless way and rang the bell that stood beside his plate. The silence deepened as all watched him.

"Where host can gratify guest he is bound to do so, by every rule of hospitality." He laid grating emphasis on the words host, guest, and hospitality; and Dunure with repressed fury knew himself rebuked. "You miss a lady at my table—a hostess to whom to toss your glasses? So be it!"

The butler stood before him.

"Bid Mistress Mackenzie come down to us!"

The man hesitated, met his master's eye, bowed and withdrew. And in the persistent stillness that succeeded—for none knew what to make of him—Eagerness looked slowly from face to face, and again was shaken with hard, secret mirth.

But when an apple-cheeked old woman, resplendent in white cap and lace apron, bustling skirts of purple silk about her, appeared as if in answer to the summons, there was such a shriek of laughter, such howls and jeers, that, for the moment, no word of Carmichael could be heard.

Presently, however, as it dawned on his guests—by his stupendous frown and the sharpness with which he turned on the new-comer—that here was no trick to mock their gallant humour, but an unexpected thwarting of his own, there was again a general hush.

“How now, Meg, and who wants you here, auld Jezebel?”

As Meg said later: “He might growl like ony ill-tempered mastiff, but there was ever a wag of the tail for her behind it a’.” Nevertheless, she trembled a little as she curtseyed, for it was a strange and a bold thing for her to be standing there, and all the braw gentlemen staring at her; but she had no fear of him.

“Eagerness, you're no in earnest in sending for yon lassie, and she under the shelter of your roof the night for the love of your ain bairn? Hech, sirs, she may not be the grand kind you're used to, but yon's a leddy.”

Eagerness's eyes were fixed on the old woman.

“Meg,” said he, “present my compliments to Miss Mackenzie, and tell her I beg for the favour of her company for half an hour. And what have I done”

(his voice dropped to a lower note) "that you'll no trust a leddy at my table for a glass of wine?"

She glanced at him smiling; her smile wavered; she smoothed her apron; then she curtseyed, once to him, once to the company, her poplin rattling and rustling, and turned on her errand without another word.

"Fill your glasses, gentlemen, and hold them ready, for you'll soon have a sight worth roasting."

From gloom Carmichael seemed to have sprung to highest spirits. There was fire under his rugged, black brows; colour had risen darkly to the lean face. Among his guests a new interest had driven all dullness forth.

But, after all, it was old Meg who came back again. She looked scared this time, and her voice was pleading:

"Miss Mackenzie's humble compliments, sir, she trusts you will not think her discourteous, but she's no raiment fit for company the night."

"No raiment? Bid her take what she fancies from the cedar room. Begone, woman, hurry! And tell Miss Mackenzie we are all waiting on her."

With one glance, as if she had seen the devil in him, old Meg hurried to the door. "Bid her make herself grand!" thundered Carmichael after her.

The sound of laughter pursued her, as she panted up the winding stairs; but she knew that his voice was not of it, that the laughter shaking him was dumb.

"Eh, lassie, but he's an awfu' man!" she cried, as she tiptoed into the nursery, and stood wringing her hands. "You maun go down, aye, and you maun make yourself grand from the gowns in the cedar presses. Hech, hinnie, you mind—the puir leddy's gowns?"

She dropped her voice, in utter accents of awe.

But the girl, rising from the table where she had just finished her evening meal, had an expression of innocent pleasure and curiosity.

"Maun I choose among the braw silks—maun I go down among a' the gentrice?"

"'Tis but for half an hour. Nay, nay, ye need have no fear, lassie. Eagerness may have his wild ways now and then, but he's always an honest gentleman. Have no fear, I'd be sair loth he'd think you wudna trust him."

"And why for no?" said Maria-Annunziata, opening velvet eyes wide.

III

Lady Liliás had been tall and very slight; the minister's daughter was as tall, but built on more generous lines. There was a white satin gown for which the girl hankered mightily, preferring it—with the taste inherited from a race where art is in the very blood—to the more elaborate garments in which the dead woman seemed to have rejoiced.

The satin folds fell in grace over her hips to the feet, but Mary-Nan turned with a rueful smile to show Meg how far the gold clasps were from meeting across her bust.

Then Meg had an inspiration. She had been woe-ful, even to tears, over the drawing on of the silk stockings, over the fitting of the high-heeled mules, which had been her mistress's bedroom wear the very month of her flitting (Maria-Annunziata's arched, well-nigh classic foot made a mockery of the narrow sandals); but the housekeeper's woman-instinct was not long proof against the attractions of dressing up. Shaking out of its folds, triumphantly, a scarf of lace, filmy as though it had been wrought by the fairies,

she flung it round the girl's shoulders; there was a hasty snapping of scissors, a fevered stitching; a pinning here, a pinning there.

"Enough, enough!" cried Mary-Nan.

She stood before a long pier-glass; the bunch of candles on either side of it made an oasis of light in the great room, which was shrouded as if the dead still lay there. Her level brows were drawn to lines of gravity, she contemplated herself; her fingers moved with unerring deftness—not a thought had she of her who had so often mirrored her frail, fatal beauty upon that very spot. At last she wheeled round with a flashing smile. With her coronet of glorious hair, dark as night; with the long snowy folds about her, she looked a priestess: nay, with the mist of lace over all, a bride!

The old woman clapped her hands.

"Eh, but you're bonny! Her that's gane couldna hold a candle to you. Come now, lassie, we've been ower long—and tread cannily, or we'll have a' the hizzies in the hoose speering on this daft business. Nay, I'll gang down with ye."

At the foot of the stairs she paused and caught the girl's arm, trembling, herself, with no unpleasurable excitement: "Come in through the orangery, Mary-Nan, and then I can be keeking how fine you look, wi' the train spread out behind you as you walk across the dining-hall."

So through the scented gloom they went. The heels of Maria-Annunziata's mules clacked on the tiles—some such slippers had her mother worn, no doubt, as she tripped under her lace shawl along the white pavement of Genoa—and she accommodated herself to them with unconscious ease.

Through the glazed arches of the orangery, between the outstretched branches, glimmered the lights of the dining-table. Voices reached them, much laughter. Both the women halted, their hearts beating, the old and the young, with almost kindred anticipation. All at once a drone filled the air, succeeded by a wild skirl.

"Gude save us!" cried Meg testily, "that's yon heathen, naked, Hieland chap of my Lord Marquess! Heaven forgie me, I could wrax the neck of him and his bag this meenit!"

She had counted upon a completely effective entrance for Mary-Nan in all her finery. But Maria-Annunziata's blood was dancing with all the innocent gaiety of her mother's race; the wild strains were as the final spur to her intoxication.

"The pipes, the dear pipes!" she exclaimed. "Ah, many's the time I've stepped to them up in the North!" She caught, as she spoke, at a bunch of blossoms shining out of the dimness. "Now I'm going in," she said; and she went straight, head high, the flowers at her breast, her heels clapping, her long train trailing behind her.

Mistress Drummond looked from the still-swaying orange branch to the retreating figure with sudden misgiving.

"Be guid to us!" she muttered, "I misdoubt the lassie's head's turned a'ready."

Looking back upon it all afterwards, Maria-Annunziata many a time marvelled at herself, blushing a hot crimson—how had she had the audacity! But, that night, neither embarrassment nor convention hampered her. As she told Meg, she walked in upon them all as though she had been somebody else; and

she felt as if she were somebody else, a great lady, who had always gone in rich stuffs, through grand spaces, with fine company.

Every eye was turned upon her ; a deep hush fell. Only Sandy McDougal, the Marquess's piper, with fixed, protruding orbs, sustained his airy strut, swelling himself in his pride like a blackcock at the wooing. His drone and his skirl rose unchecked, but subtly altered in rhythm to the swing of her step, to the clap of her little heels.

Then up sprang Eagerness ; and with him every man. The little Marquess dragged a chair for her. But Eagerness gave her his own seat, taking her hand in that way of his that seemed rough, yet was gentle. He drew a deep breath through his nostrils, inhaling the mixed fragrance of orange-blossom and cedar-spice that surrounded her. His face was strangely white, she thought ; of the many there she was conscious only of him. Into the golden hazel of his eye had sprung, first surprise, and then a lightning flash, gone ere she could think on what it meant.

In a mad way the pipe-music seemed to have got into her blood. Sometimes, when out on the springy moorland, with the mighty west wind in her face, she had felt her pulses leap in just this manner, as if to some mysterious irresistible call, some promise of ecstasy.

Eagerness filled a glass and thrust it into her hand. She had never tasted wine before ; but she put her lips to the rim, deeming it uncivil to refuse. Scarce a mouthful did she swallow—all bubbles and sweet pungency, yet it seemed to run through her with a singing exhilaration ; surely no seemly beverage for a maid ! She set down the glass ; then

the boy who had the seat on the other side of her—he with the curly hair—spoke. She wondered why there was such an outbreak of laughter, just because of those two or three civil phrases. He went steadily on, the small cool tones that matched his person reaching her through clamour of pipes and voices :

“May I take a glass of wine with you, Miss Mackenzie?” And, as she shook her head: “Is champagne not to your liking? Would you prefer claret? Nay, do you not wish to drink at all—then may I tempt you with some fruit?”

A gentleman with dancing eyes, who had been staring at her across the table, gave a loud laugh :

“Hark to Dumb Dumbarton! Gadso, if there’s tempting to be done, let it be by some one who can grow a beard!”

He seized the basket of fruit in front of him as he spoke, and came round the table to drop on one knee by the side of the girl’s chair.

This was the signal for Damory to reach for the oranges, and Rob for the grapes. In another minute the three men were each absurdly kneeling around her. Maria-Annunziata smiled down at them. They were very kind and very merry, to be sure; and, as innocently as a child, she found pleasure in feeling herself the centre of admiring attention. All the while the music surged round and round the table, droning like the wind in the forest, with ever and anon the wild exultant cry as if some bird had broken into flight.

“Nay, and if I may, I would like an orange weel enough,” she said, and took one from the dish.

He who proffered it had a narrow, pale face, with narrow eyes, set darkly; the chin that rested on his

tall stock had thin and cruel lines about it. He sprang to his feet with a lurch that flung the golden fruit in every direction.

"The choice is for me!" he cried. He had a high voice, very sweet. "Out of your chair, my Lord Marquess; for once, I take precedence."

The Marquess rose with a solemn bow; and Maria-Annunziata thought to read affront on his boyish face. Never in her life would she wilfully hurt a living creature. So, very quickly and pleasantly she cried to him that she could very well like a pear, too, if he would peel it for her. And when laughter ran loose again, she thought in her mind that these great gentlemen were as easy to mirth—aye, and as foolish as the callants in the village.

But one laughed not. Eagerness, sunk back in his chair, was staring straight before him, tapping the table with restless fingers.

"The poor gentleman," said the girl to herself, "he's thinking on her that left him!" A shadow fell on her gaiety. She wondered why she should feel thus sore at heart to see him brood, and why the pipe-strains that she had deemed joyful should all at once pierce her with their lament.

Then he who had first knelt before her spoke in her ear so close that she started:

"I refuse to be left out in the cold."

Cold! His face seemed all glow to her, with these red sparks coming and going in his eyes, that flicker of nostril and quivering lip, like the play of little flames. She drew back—though, courteously, she tried to keep her smile.

"And, indeed," she cried, "you are very kind, sir, but I must even abide by my choice."

Again the guffaw, the shouts. Her mouth opened in astonishment. What had she said?

"Dumbarton," cried Eagerness, as sharply as a dog snarls, "stop those confounded pipes!"

"She's made her choice—oh Gad!" cried Damory, rocking himself to his mirth.

Unheeding, Lord Dumbarton pressed his chair nearer, and laid the pear he had been delicately peeling on her plate. The lean jaw of Sir Lucius became suddenly set.

"Mark ye, Dumb, I am the first," he cried.

"Stop those pipes, I say!" repeated Eagerness.

The order caught the piper in full blast; the chanter dropped from his mouth, and the wind of his self-conceit seemed to go out of him as dismally as the wailing breath from his bag. He rolled an eye of indignation at his chief. But the latter held towards him in silence a brimming quaigh. Sandy McDougal was fain to swallow his mortification with its contents, and strut from the room in the tallest dignity he could muster.

As the music failed, a sense of loneliness fell on Maria-Annunziata. She was no longer the grand lady; she was only the poor minister's daughter, dressed up in dead folk's clothes for the amusement of the laird's idle guests. She glanced round the table piteously; truly she had been over-bold, over-ready. The lights dazzled her; the fumes of the wine in the air, the fierce sweetness of the orange-blossom at her breast turned her sick. Her cheeks burned because of the gaze of all those eyes that looked at her so strangely, and her heart was cold because Eagerness looked at her no more.

"Fie, what a cursed set of ungallant beggars are

we!" cried Dunure of the dancing eyes. He had drawn his chair close to the girl's, almost wedging out Lord Dumbarton. "We are scarce like ever to have such a toast again! A health! a health!"

He leaned freely over her shoulder to fill a glass as he spoke; Teague sprang up, swaying, to give the company the benefit of the inspiration her beauty had brought to his muddled wits:

"Dark as the mountain shade,
Fair as the simmer moon,
Fair as the night of June. . . ."

The flow of his muse was drowned in tipsy Rob's shouts:

"A health, a health!" He would have drunk to his mother's dairy-wench with the same enthusiasm.

Lord Dumbarton lifted a brimmer in silence; but Simon Carmichael never moved. All stood but he. She heard the clucking of the wine as it ran in gulps down their throats.

It was old Meg's conviction that, at this particular moment, the devil entered completely into her master's guests.

"It a' came," she opined, "from meddlin' with the clothes that belonged to the dead. Hech, the puir lost soul! She was angered at us from the sair place, and she sent ane to avenge her—and only that there were good angels about——!"

Within the orangery the old woman had been keeping guard. She rapped against a pane, shook the glass door, in the hope of attracting Mary-Nan's attention and beckoning her away. But the girl sat as if paralysed.

It was after the drinking of that last bumper,

indeed, that, if devil there were among them, he broke loose.

"We can't fight for her," hiccoughed Damory, "but, dash it all, we can toss for her!"

In the midst of the acclamation that followed, Eagerness lifted his eyes and looked murder round the table.

"Who told you she was to be tossed for?"

"Caw, caw!" cried Dunure madly, in mimicry of the harsh voice.

Dumbarton raised his rare note:

"Nay, gentlemen, our host is in the right; he promised us a sight to toast, a hostess to drink to—no more. I trust no one of us has so far forgot himself as to hanker for another man's property—and we his guests."

"Gad, be a sportsman—toss for her, Eagerness!"

"I'll gie ye my bay mare for her," shouted Rob—"Red Lass out of Red Douglas and Banshee!"

"Give me but an hour to speak for myself," whispered Dunure, "and you may ask of me what you will, Simon Carmichael."

Teague, alone, sodden after that last cup, said nothing.

Carmichael struck the table.

"By the Lord!" he cried, with sneering lip—"what a pack of fine fellows I've gathered round me tonight. Faugh, you fools, who out of your own rottenness can conceive nothing but rottenness! Was it not told you that a lady was coming down among ye—is it not a lady's privilege to have her choice? Let her have her choice of you in the name of heaven or hell!"

Ere he had finished Dunure had boldly flung an

arm about Maria-Annunziata. Very little had she understood of their clamour; but the most innocent know evil by the horror of it. And this touch upon her was a horror beyond bearing. Her blood uprose with a fierce anger that was like actual fire. There sprang a flash as of flame before her eyes. . . .



When she came back to her surroundings a cry was ringing in her ears. In her hand she held the silver fruit-knife, and it was stained with crimson half its length. Dunure, his hand to his throat, was glaring at her, panting, livid. She heard a silly, strangled laugh somewhere. Then there was a terrible silence. She began to tremble, still holding the red blade.

Eagerresse walked across to Dumbarton, and asked him in a low voice for his dirk—which, awe-struck and sobered, the boy unhooked and handed to him without a word. Then he turned to Maria-Annunziata and laid the weapon, sheathed as it was, across the carven arms of her chair.

"Gentlemen, here sits the lady whom—if she so condescend—I hope to make my wife. He who dares to cast upon her a look, unbecoming the chosen of Eagerresse, shall answer for it to me, even to-night."

All this he said with a very great air. Maria-Annunziata cast away the stained knife; and, covering her face with her hands, broke into tears.

She felt his touch upon her shoulder. She knew it was his touch; but, for the rushing in her ears and the bursting pain at her heart, she knew very little of what passed next—never knew how Dunure tried to curse and choked; nor how Damory tried to laugh

again, and again failed ; how Dumbarton bowed very deep to his cousin, and craved pardon of him and of her like the honest gentleman he was, for the offences he had merely witnessed ; how Rob, with one look at the dirk, slunk unsteadily from the room ; nor how, with his head sunk in dreadful discomfort on his breast, the poet was snoring.

"Don't, my dear, don't!" said Eagerness, as she sobbed.

The compassion in that altered voice stung her. She dropped her hands and sprang to her feet ; the dirk fell clattering on the floor. Down the front of her white gown was an ugly smear of blood. She looked round, her lip trembling, large tears welling slowly and falling. She strove to steady her voice :

"It was no kind deed, gentlemen, to make sport of a poor country lass. Eagerness, I maun thank you that you spoke up for me so kind ; but O!—I winna hold you to your word——"

A sob rose in her throat ; blindly she ran from them.

"She passed through the orangery like a wild thing," said Meg, as she afterwards narrated the culminating events of the night. "And my legs were sae waibly beneath me, they could scarce carry my auld body up the stairs after her. Fair perplexed I was lest it should be my duty to be with him that had swooned within after the stab she dealt him under the chin. Hech, but yon was a terrible business—to think of Mary-Nan, the meenister's daughter—eh, sirs! Yet my mind misgave me sae sair for the puir lassie and my ain folly in bringing her down that—'The foul fiend mend him!' says I (that I should say so!). And, troth, I think I was

as daft as the rest of them that night. Off I set after her, the sound of her sobbing and wailing unco pitiful in my ears.

"Midway on the tower stairs there comes a shriek from the nursery that gars me turn cold; and on the top of me falls the tawpie, Elspeth, who had been watching by the bairn. 'The ghaist, the ghaist!' she squeals, 'the ghaist of the leddy, a' in her wedding gown, wi' bluid on it!' . . . And with that, having found some one to do it upon, she makes a show of swoounding; I had to clout her soundly on the side of the pate to ca' the senses back to her. And, as was to be expected, that roar of hers woke the bairn, and he sets up a pretty rout on his own account—and him dreaming, puir laddy, of yon black-faced English wumman, an' calling out: 'Don't beat me, don't beat me!'

"Weel, he was soothing doun, as I clambered wi' all haste up the stair again, and I kent he was in Mary-Nan's arms—for as wae she was herself, she would never let the bairn greet—when, who should go by me, with a leap like a goat up the crag's side, but Eagerness himsel'! The Lord be gude to us, but that was a nicht of hame-coming! Weel, it seemed to me that I was to do nowt syne my master crossed his threshold the day but speer on his doings! But the truth maun be told.

"There I stood again, and the nursery door ajar, keeking and hearkening wi' a' my een and ears! And, sure enough, there stood Mary-Nan, rocking and cuddling the wee bairn, with tears running down her ain face. Ae minute Eagerness stood and glowered at her, and the next he was close till her, speaking—eh, ye may believe me when I tell it ye,

me that knew him frae the hour he could speak at all, I never heard that voice frae him.

"'O,' says he, 'to see you with my child! That first minute,' says he, 'I saw you with the child, I knew in my heart. . . . Can you spare me a hand from the bairn, Maria-Annunziata?' he goes on, 'for I want to kiss it—that chaste hand, that strong hand,' he says. 'Aye, it was a bitter test I let you go through, I know that. But, see you, I am a hard man, and I have been sore betrayed, and I grow mad at times. Will you forgive me?' And never a word out of her, but shivering and sighing, and wee Ronald whimpering in between, no distressfully, but just to be comforted.

"'O, my Flower o' the Orange,' says he (aye, queer words he had), 'when you came in with those blossoms at your breast, and the scent of the cedar about you—I called you bride in my heart—I called you wife—the wife I had dreamed of but never known. Do you think,' he says, 'I can ever let you go again?' And, as still she answered him nought, he cries, with a summons in his tone: 'Maria-Annunziata, I think you love my child.'

At that she turns her face to him with a smile in it among a' the tears. Eh, but she was bonny, even with the grief upon her!

"'Aye,' she says, 'I love the bairn.'

"With that he presses up to her. 'And me, Maria-Annunziata?'

"And at last she answers him, soft and steady: 'O, aye,' says she, 'I could very well love you too, Eagerness.'

"I saw him take them baith into his arms, her and the bairn. . . . Tut, tut, I'm an auld fule!"

THE YOUNG CONSPIRACY

II

THE YOUNG CONSPIRACY

A GREY place, in sooth, Edinburgh town seemed to me, fresh as I was from the sunshine and gay colours of France. And it was a bleak wind that came hustling up the steep street when I reached the corner of the Canongate. Yet my heart was blithe enough: was I not back in my long-dreamed-of native land? My own master, for the first time in twenty years! (My own master in my own country: what did that not mean for me?) And a week or so, all my own, before passing into fresh thralls.

In St. Germaines and Versailles, as you may guess, a lad in the *Gensdarmes Escossois*, with his mother's brother keeping guardian's watch over him the while, sips of liberty so little that he scarce knows the taste of it upon his tongue. And further, if all I heard of him were true, my noble father was little like to give me doucely the run of my youth, once I got beneath those smoky rafters of Craigmalloch dimly recollected from the hours of childhood.

So this week which I had resolved to allow myself in Auld Reekie was stolen, as it were, from rightful authority—all by the good fortune of a marvellous favourable wind that ran us into Leith harbour so many days

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before our computation. Here, then, was I, with all the joys of the world before me; but twenty, as I have told; free; a returned exile to whom, though he was at home, everything was yet new and alluring. A stout lad, to boot, not ill-looking, fancy busy in his brain and springtime in his blood. I had dropped my small baggage at a decent-looking inn by the harbour; and I had still the sea-smell in my nostrils, even after my long walk, as I stood under the Nether Bow Port and looked up and down the tall street, the high-topping houses on either side, with their small doors and many windows, so unlike all I was familiar with, and all around me the lilt of the kindly tongue!

"Now," says I to myself, "shall I break my fast in some merry tavern. And after that, why, I'll go with the wind," says I, just as a gust caught me. And this blew me into the High Street, where up I walked towards the sunset, casting eager eyes about for a suitable house of entertainment and already reckoning what I should order after the monotony of the sea-fare.

By and by, however, as I went, I began to perceive that between the pleasant ease with which a Frenchman learns to take his life and the attitude of my countrymen towards existence there is a singular difference. The folk went by me without a friendly word upon the time o' day; without even a glance of curiosity; absorbed in grave—nay, it seemed to me, in sour—thought; or deep in converse with some equally serious companion. The women, hard-favoured as they were hard-voiced, cast foul water into the gutters, and shouted to their children from the deeps of

wynds, threatening dire punishment. The very urchins, I thought, played with an air of purpose and business; kicked and cuffed and shrilled in anger at each other, but had no laughter. There was ne'er the stave of a song afloat in the afternoon air; none of the bustling cheer you will hear all over Paris at such a time, when pretty wenches trip forth to work, with a keek of the eye for passing admirers; where jolly house-mothers forgather on their doorsteps, gossiping in the deepening sunshine; and your rôtiisseur and your pâtissier, your sweep or your barber, will each have a jest for you as you go.

Presently, accosting a worthy-looking, elderly man who came towards me with sober mien and deliberate step, I begged of him to direct me to the ordinary most à la mode.

He surveyed me with a dark look.

"There are pits enough gaping for youths and fools," said he then in his harsh Scots; "and if, as I take it from your speech, you are from France, young man, doubtless you will find the way yourself without my pointing it."

With which civility he passed on, leaving me chilled in my merry humour and stirred in my temper.

I began to think that I was, in truth, playing a fool's part in seeking a frolic in this over-godly town. "These are the wretches," said I to myself, in a new mood of bitterness, "who have turned out their lawful King and called in a stranger to rule over them, snuffing texts the while to justify the traitor's part!" At home, at least, I should be within loyal walls, however sternly ruled. And I had more than

a mind as I stood, hungry and discontented, to throw up my project and set my face forthwith towards the Highlands.

Yet, even as I paused, a youth swung by me, humming under his breath the tune of a loyal song I knew: "*Little wat ye wha's coming. . .*" (I set the words to the air with a quick pleasure, as at the unexpected meeting of an old friend.) He was followed at a little distance by a couple of serving-men. I noticed that none wore a cockade, but a dried sprig of rowan or some such red-berried tree in their caps. I was not learned enough in Scottish matters (after my upbringing in exile), to be able to trace the badge, as I deemed it; but that here was the sign of a high house I thought to know. The arrogant glance, the tilt of the head, the pride of his carriage, the fashion in which the youth eyed me passing, as if it were my duty to make way for him, spoke eloquently enough. Beyond doubt I should have resented these very airs of superiority had I not been suddenly and singularly attracted by the recklessness of his face—by that very defiance of young blood that flashed at me as he went by, that swayed in the rhythm of his gait. It struck me that he swung the full skirts of his coat as one more familiar to the kilt; that he cocked his hat as it were a bonnet, and carried his small sword as provokingly as any claymore. I turned and stared after the three a moment or two, then started in pursuit down the High Street once more. A spark from this young cock-of-the-walk's joy of life had set my own inflammable stuff afire again: it was as if a jewel, a ruby, had glinted at me out of the mud of that sad grey town.

The lad of the rowan-sprig made a straight course of it for a while; not like one sauntering, but rather one who knows well where he is going. Just before reaching the Nether Bow, he suddenly veered down a wynd on the right, with his retainers in full tramp behind. I drew up close, and thought myself fortunate indeed when I saw that the cellar entrance into which they presently plunged was that of a tavern: the sign was painted over the door—The Fox and Grapes.

I shall remember that sign as long as I live: the black board with its bunch of scarlet fruit, and its fox that might have been a squirrel for the jauntiness with which he carried his brush. And the tavern it heralded—in Paris such a dismal entrance could only have led to a coupe-gorge! And the narrow, black street running downhill, only its highest windows streaked with a pale sunshine which seemed to bring cold, not heat. And the stone steps, worn cup-shape, disappearing into the murk of gaping doors, whence issued savours of food and a thin blue reek.

As I clattered down in my turn, I bethought me of my grum gentleman's warning: "There are pits enough gaping for youths and fools." And I laughed. Little thought I that, when my footsteps should again beat these worn stones, the whole of my life would lie changed before me.

I swaggered into the cellar with as good an imitation of my guide's conquering grace as I could muster in the uncertainty of my passage through unaccustomed gloom. A lusty wench, with red hair and pale blue eyes, and a softness of voice and manner that brought back memories of childhood and of my

Highland nurse, received me. She motioned me to a solitary table, over which she passed an apron that I judged—the day being Friday—had seen service throughout the week. She then requested my will.

With the tail of my eye on Master Rowan-Sprig, I ordered, at hazard, the messes she suggested in her pretty, insinuating way. Meanwhile he who was evidently the master of the establishment attended to the wants of his more important patron. He was a burly, elderly man, whose chin bore as dingy witness to Friday as did my wench's apron. He made a great parade of mopping the gentleman's table, and shifted a wooden saltbowl from corner to corner. But I, intent in watching, was quick to apprehend that they conversed earnestly together, and that in the Gaelic; in which tongue I was not so proficient as my uncle Craigmalloch—who held fast to the old traditions—would have wished. Thus the drift of their speech escaped me; yet I could not be mistaken that both looked towards me ever and anon, sharply, and as though expectantly. Finally, aloud and in English, the host said:

“And I've not been forgettin' your honour's liking.” And caught up from a cupboard a flagon, darkly encrusted and cobwebbed, which he nursed a second in both hands, and deposited on the table as gently as if it had been a baby.

“A man cannot have too good wine for a good toast!” cried Rowan-Sprig. His voice had a bright, imperious ring that echoed gratefully in my ear. Again he flung a look at me, which I returned as bravely and invitingly as I might. I was burning to have my knees under the same board, and to chink a

glass with one who had taken my youthful fancy as freshly as the spring wind.

"And what wine will your honour wish?" said the soft voice of the girl in my ear.

"I'll have," cried I, starting round to her, "a bottle from the same bin as yonder gentleman.

Her pale eyes grew round. She hesitated, looked almost frightened.

"The old clary?"

"Why not, my love?" and with the corner of my glance upon my hero, who sat, his hand encircling a brimming glass, fixing me now very steadily. "Why not?" cried I, arrogant young fool that I was, thinking myself as fine a fellow in the gentleman's eyes as he was in mine. "If wine be measured here by toasts, shall not my glass be of the best?"

I was meaning the toast to my native land and to my first freedom, and (God help me!) to the sudden desire of friendship that had sprung up within me. But the other guest, though he could not have divined any such complicated thought, pricked his ears. A second still he measured me. Then he half rose and addressed me with a very pretty courtesy.

"I believe," he said, "the old clary is growing scarce. And, indeed, when heads should be clear, 'tis better to share a bottle than to drain it alone—however good . . . the toast." The last words he said slowly, and, as I had good cause to remember, with peculiar emphasis.

My answer need scarce be recorded. I made him my best French bow. In a twinkling my wish was accomplished: I was stretching my legs under the same table as those arrogant limbs that had swung

the coat-skirts as if they had been the free kilt; I was clinking my glass—my hand trembled—with that held by his steady fingers.

"Take my lads to the kitchen, Duncan," said the young chieftain to mine host, "and give them their due fill, but no more. And, as this gentleman and I evidently have matters to talk over, we will profit at once of your empty hour."

The instant we were alone, my entertainer lifted his glass; and, his bright hazel eyes deep in mine, "From St. Germain's," he said in a sharp whisper.

"'Tis my French Court bow," thought I to myself. And, seizing my glass in my turn—I never knew what took me or why the words should come so pat; 'twas doubtless from some vague notion of re-establishing myself a true Scotsman in his estimation, in spite of foreign ways—"From St. Germain's," I said, "to Holyrood."

Hereupon the watchful intensity that sat so curiously on his boyish face vanished. He drew a sharp breath. His eye gleamed.

"So may it be!" he cried solemnly. And I (who, for a fool, had intermittent inklings) realised that the toast was no other than a proper loyal one; upon which, none being more loyal than myself, I thought myself bound to look mighty knowing; to echo his "So may it be!" in a tone of mysterious ardour, and to quaff my beaker with all the ceremony conceivable.

I was rolling the taste of the wine upon my tongue when I found my companion's glance seeking mine with something of impatience.

"You landed this morning?" queried he.

"Aye," quoth I, with mortification, thinking I must indeed bear "foreigner" stamped in my air.

"You're before your time," he added, drawing his watch.

"Aye," said I, speaking of the fair winds; "'tis all a piece of mighty luck."

And when I had said it, I began to wonder how he could know; whether, among all the mystery with which it had pleased my uncle to surround my departure, it had been his care to set friends to watch my arrival. And this thought so displeased me that the pleasure in my new acquaintance began to fade, and I looked at him doubtfully.

"Luck?" echoed he, with a quick frown. "'Twould be a dangerous comrade to trust! I marked you, sir, from the first, in the Lawnmarket."

"And I you, sir," cried I, flattered out of my suspicions. I smiled as I spoke. That brave face of his had not yet relaxed. He turned it now upon me with a deeper gravity and seemed to wait for me to speak again.

"I wonder," said I, after a pause, more to cover the embarrassment gathering upon me than from any great hunger (for the strong wine, the reek of the place, and something intangibly strange that was growing into the situation had cut my fine appetite of a little while ago)—"I wonder when the slut with the red hair will condescend to bring me those collops?"

"Pshaw!" exclaimed my comrade, and his impatient hand, that had barely restrained itself these last moments, began to tap the table. "Surely, sir your collops . . ." He broke off, catching back an evidently fierce temper with a strong effort of will. "You are right to be cautious, no doubt. But

surely——” Again he paused, pushed the empty glass and the bottle on one side, and leaned across to me. “Did all go off well? Was the landing safe?”

I stared at him. Was my first Scottish friend, my pretty lad, a mere lunatic after all?

“Why doubtless,” I laughed, “since I am here.”

“And . . . he?” His lips were nearly on my ear.

“He?” I echoed, and from sheer vagueness laughed again.

Without a moment's transition, fury leaped out of his face. I never saw such a gamecock for sudden anger. His lips trembled; but once more some strong, mysterious motive forced him to curb his passion. He hastily poured himself a fresh glass of wine and swallowed it in gulps. Then, dashing the red drops from his lips:

“By the Rood, you are over young to be so prudent!” he said constrainedly. “But doubtless you are right, and you put my recklessness to the shame. Let us then exchange credentials before another word passes.”

Now it may seem strange that even at this point I should fail to perceive that, by my petulant spring humour, I had been drawn into the inner whirl of some conspiracy. But, as my story will show, if I was quick of impulse, I was somewhat slow of apprehension. Naturally, like all right-thinking sprigs of the time, my highest aspirations pointed towards the day when the rightful standard should be raised once again in the old country; when, out of the bonny glens, the faithful lads should gather to it—a day only the more ardently yearned for since the

failure of the Roquefeuille expedition against the English coast last year. But whenever I had broached the subject to Craigmalloch I had been met by the quiet phrase: "We'll bide our time!" Moreover, my head was full this evening of my own small importance. The thought had taken possession of me that here was some young nobleman, some kinsman, maybe, who knew more of me than I of him, and that his irritation arose from what he doubtless took as an assumption of ignorance on my part. "Foreign airs"! I had seen a few visitors, fresh from the North country, bristle with sensitive pride on the subject of these same airs, without which (they averred) their Frenchified countrymen of the Scottish Guards could not as much as pass the time of day to them.

Therefore I deemed this a fair opening, at last, for the smoothing of matters out between us, and my smile was ingratiating as I answered him.

"Credentials? Willingly, my dear sir, so that you gratify me first with yours."

His eye widened upon me as I spoke; in it no longer that sparkling anger—which, so far from offending, had added to his attraction—but a dark suspicion. And, as he looked, to suspicion succeeded fury.

"Impostor!" he shouted. "Spy!" and was at my throat.

I had but time to see murder in his look, and to rise to meet it standing. We had a silent death-grapple; and then I shook him off. He raised a second screech before he was for me again:

"Duncan! Robbie! Here, lads! A spy, a traitor!"

Whether it was the meanness of his calling for aid when he had only one to deal with, or whether that tussle for sheer life had roused the fighting devil within me—you have had it from me that my instincts are quicker than my reason—but here a rage such as I had known but seldom before in my lifetime came upon me. Perhaps, if you want to examine closer, there was something of the fear of fear in it. For was I not here, in a hideous dilemma, under as odious a stigma as can threaten a man, and like to leave my life in it? My sudden enemy had his blade out as he shouted. I cannot recall to mind how I closed with him; but the next instant I had a weapon in my hand and had struck with it. With a deep groan he staggered, and then fell across the table.

The fury in my brain cleared. I had a vision of the stillness of that young body, the overturned wine-bottle, and the two reds slowly mingling; of the bursting open of the kitchen door, and of the white face of my sandy wench peering in upon us. She raised a loud wail; and I heard an answering clamour far within. I looked at the blade in my hand, dark half-way to the hilt: it was not mine. I had struck him with his own sword! At this, I know not why, the fear I feared leaped upon me. I cast the bloody thing from me.

“Awa’ with ye!” cried a voice. It was the girl’s. God knows for what reason she took the stranger’s part. She clapped the door to behind her, and held it with both hands. I saw the terror of my fate in her piteous eyes.

I ran out of the black room, up the steps into the lane, and down into its deeper shadows. As I turned the first corner I heard the hue and cry begin;

and, my heart beating against my ribs, I fled at first blindly, like a hare in an open field—from shadow to shadow in a mere instinct of concealment. After a while, however, an extraordinary lucidity succeeded to stupid panic. All my faculties seemed to concentrate into cunning. I halted a second, and deliberately took my bearings; then I doubled round the first opening; traversed a network of lanes; emerged into an empty court. Here, catching sight of a gaping doorway, I dived behind one of the great panels. It was an inspiration.

I heard the rush pass by, the hubbub die away; waited yet a while to taste the luxury of shelter and to let my panting breath subside. Then I stepped forth again. Though I strove to assume a great air of composure, even of swagger, as of a young gentleman whose pleasure it was to take the air hatless, it was now I began to feel a kind of trembling in my knees and a general chill misery.

Was it fair that such misfortune should overtake an honest lad, who sought but a spring adventure? "There are pits gaping for youths and fools!"... Had the old man cursed me? or was Edinburgh indeed so dangerous a place that the mere cracking of a bottle must be fraught with death and disaster? There was no one about to witness how ill my attempts at jauntiness accorded with my distress. I was in a dingy courtyard, deep and dank as a well, dominated on three sides by tier upon tier of grey masonry studded with black windows. Beyond the archway ran the lane, dark and narrow and slimy. The sky scarce gave light enough to make visible the melancholy scene. There was but a single gleam for the eye to rest on: a narrow door in the main building

on the other side of the court was open, and through it shone a peep of green.

In such plights as mine, the most reasonable must needs be guided by chance. I cast another desperate look about me, and then set my steps for that tremor of budding foliage.

And so it was, once again, the wanton humour of spring that made me enter upon the second act in the strange and tangled drama of my first day's freedom.

II

The beckoning of the green brought me, through the narrow stone passage of the house, into a broader lane (which I now know as Mary's Wynd). One side of the road was dominated by the usual row of those bleak houses of which I was growing heartily sick. But on the other ran walls of uneven height, broken by gateways; and from over the top of the stonework, in the afterglow, came glimpses of blossoming fruit-trees, gushes of heady fragrance.

Now, of course my sensible plan was first to seek a hatter in the more noted part of the town, where a fugitive might scarce be looked for; thence to win my way back to my harbour inn, and set face for home with all speed. Yet I went up the street by the side of the gardens; lingering, here where the tide of April had flung a foaming wave over the garden barriers, there to peer in through a half-open door at nodding daffodils or at a sweep of greensward. But whereas an hour ago the call of the spring to my blood had been all hot and blithe, now it filled me with melancholy unutterable. Once again, in fancy, I saw the

lad who, in my eyes, had embodied all the pride of life, come swinging down the High Street; met the glint of his handsome eyes and heard the lilt of the old song; marked the rhythm of his step; then saw him, a broken thing, cast across the table over which our glasses had clinked fellowship.

"Little wat ye wha's coming."

As softly as the scent of the blossoms from the hidden parterres to my nostrils, came a tune—his tune—to my ears. My guilty heart shuddered. It was so faint, so intangible, yet so distinct, it might have been his spirit mocking me on the breeze:

*"Little wat ye wha's coming:
McGilvrey of Drumglass is coming."*

I started, and looked round over my shoulder. The street was empty:

*"The Cam'rons and McLeans coming;
A' the dunywastles coming."*

I think I swayed as I walked on again. And now the stave pursued me, soft yet insistent. It was a woman's voice; and the words were crooned rather than sung. It seemed to me, though I had neither time nor composure for reflection, that I must obey the call, or signal, whichever it was. I came back a few steps:

*"The Drummonds and McDonalds coming;
Little wat ye wha's coming."*

In the opening of the door where I had paused to gaze absent-mindedly on the daffodils, now stood a woman. She had a tartan shawl flung over her head, but not so closely as to hide the powder of her massed-up curls. Out of the rich hues of the setting,

under the mist of the hair, dark eyes were eagerly fixed upon me. I noticed little else then, except that her face was pale and small and that the hand which held the folds under her chin was delicate as ivory. As I approached she flung the door wide; and, dropping her shawl, she stretched out both hands to me.

"Oh, come in, come in!" she cried. She spoke as she sang, in a sweet monotonous drawl; yet there was a desperate urgency in her gesture, a brilliant excitement in the dark eyes. I hesitated. From bewilderment to bewilderment this day was leading me. She caught my wrist with that little, fine hand: it had strength in it, but it was more the passion of her gaze which compelled me. I let myself be drawn into the enclosure and watched her close the door and push the bolt. Then she stood with her back against it, finger on lip, panting a little.

As I gazed stupidly I heard a rumour grow in the street without and some shouting; then running footsteps pass up and beyond us, then drop away again into the distant hum of the city. Still she stood a moment or two—the taper finger at her pretty mouth, the laces and silks of her gown fluttering faintly with her quickened breath. Her image was burnt into my heart and brain in that hour of my dangerous adventure. I have but to close my eyes to see her again as I saw her then—the pointed face, with its witty, delicate lines; the curving mouth, with its grave upward curl, as of inquiry; the eyes, so dark under the powdered hair, filled with so radiant a light of courage and devotion. I can see the faint blue and white lines of her silk dress and the arch of her most slender foot.

"Hounds!" she cried suddenly. "They were close

on the scent indeed! . . . Oh, sir——” The sweet drone of her voice was broken as by a sob. “If I had not been on the watch. . . . ! Ah, but I knew it was you! Hush——” as I tried to speak; “not a word! Oh, you are so pale, so exhausted!”

The tenderness of her glance stirred me with an agony of self-pity. I was but a lad after all, and had done and suffered cruel things that day.

“Would God,” I exclaimed bitterly, “I had never set foot on this treacherous shore—and it my own land!”

She gave a cry like a hurt dove:

“Ah, no, sir, it breaks my heart! Here you are on loyal ground—your own ground—with your own. Oh, we must have failed somehow in forethought and prudence . . . but not in our devotion!”

And the singular creature, the passion of whose speech and movement struck me in ever quainter contrast with the changeless soft note of her voice, caught up the tartan shawl where it lay on the path, and hurried to spread it upon the steps that led up into the mansion. And, glancing back at me:

“No fear of treachery here,” she said; “walk on, sir, and enter your house.” Then voicelessly: “Oh, my liege!” she breathed.

“Madam!” I exclaimed, the whole misconception, as absurd as it was dangerous and tragic, flashing at last upon me. “Madam, I cannot permit you——”

But freakish fate willed it otherwise. There was a shout once again in the street. Some one was hoarsely calling: “This way, this way!” and there came a clatter of rushing feet. The old panic seized me. Let those who have cleverer minds and stronger nerves than myself blame me. It was no moment

for explanations. Bowing my head, I set foot upon the tartan spread for the son of a King and entered—unwilling impostor—into that house of loyalty.

Conceive me, then, introduced into an apartment at the top of the house, overlooking the same strip of green garden. The lady, mere girl as she was, seemed mistress of the establishment. We were crossed by some servants, to whom she gave orders. On the topmost passage an old woman in a white cap met us, and flung out her hand with a quavering gesture of inquiry.

"Aye, Meenie," said my guide, "the visitor has come." The other dropped an obeisance to me as before a sacred shrine. "Glory be to God, Miss Rachel!" she cried.

Rachel! The name pleased my ear.

Together, the old and the young, they brought me into the guest-chamber, with a reverence that makes me blush even now to think on; and there they left me. I let myself drop into the great, carved oak chair, with its high back and its blazon tapestry, glad of the solitude, trying to think, to plan. Yet there was but one course open to me.

"I shall make a clean breast of the whole story," said I to myself. "She will forgive me; my name will be warrant for me: none of my house were ever doubted."

Presently—for to be young is to be all despair or all hope—I saw myself performing prodigies of valour, the leading spirit of a great plot, inspired by the eyes of the sweetest and fairest of conspirators.

She scratched at the door, like a deliberate mouse, and came in, followed by old Meenie, who bore a tray with wine and viands. I had been so full of

my plans for self-revealing, and was now so disappointed to see her enter accompanied, that unconsciously I riveted another link in my chain by remaining seated, as one who has never served himself. I have thought often since of my folly. There is no worse or more easy cowardice than that of silence; no more fatal lie than the suppression of the truth. What would it have mattered, after all, had twenty old women heard me shamed, having to shame myself before that single, pure and ardent soul? I dallied, while Rachel served me to wine, with those airs, at once reverential and tender, that were beautiful and agonising to me to witness. As I drank, revolving my speech upon my tongue, she addressed me—and my fate was sealed.

“You must forgive,” she said, “that neither of my brothers is here to attend upon you. Julian is abroad at the harbour-side, watching; and Alistair has just been brought home to us sorely wounded.”

My teeth clicked against the glass. “Good God!” I exclaimed, a horrible suspicion falling like a cloud upon my brain.

“Yes,” said the girl. Her soft voice went on uninflected, but the eyes were fierce between tears ever welling and ever burnt up, unshed. “There is a traitor at work somewhere. A spy, who pretended to be your messenger, met Alistair at the appointed place and when unmasked tried to murder him. They have just brought my brother back from the tavern. It is a dangerous wound, and he is now unconscious.”

I sat petrified.

“What a misfortune!” I stammered at last.

"Aye, indeed, for Alistair is the cleverest of us all. And the villain has escaped. The traitor!—oh, could I but reach him!"

"What would you do with him, Miss Rachel?" I spoke as though in a dream. Beneath these accumulated blows of fate I was as one struck silly.

"I would kill him!" said she.

She cooed the words after her fashion, in the voice of a dreaming dove. But I saw how the ivory hand was clenched; how the eyes flamed; into what a thin, vindictive line the curving lips straightened themselves. I had no doubt that she spoke her heart. Ah, it was not the blade in her grasp I dreaded, but the scorn in her glance. I should have cared very little to lose my life, then; but to save it I could not have spoken the word that was to cast me so low before her.

The passion left her face; gentleness came back to her glance. "But indeed," she told me then, "there can be no sorrow in this house to-day, since you are safe. And from what peril! I knew in my heart you were in danger: all the morning I could not rest. It was Heaven sent me to watch at the gate. Our Alistair cannot die, now that you are under his roof!"

Had I been he whom she deemed me to be, what sweet comfort might I not have drawn from such courage and loyalty! I turned my head away. I think I groaned.

At this she whispered something to the servant. The old woman turned upon me the canny eye of the nurse who has had the rearing of many a man; I caught the words:

"Puir laddie—fair worn out!"

"Oh, you must rest," murmured Rachel then to me. "Oh, I have done wrong to trouble you with our trouble. You can sleep, without a thought, to be strong for to-morrow's great day. God is above us, the cause is just, we are your true servants."

'Twas some devil, surely, that moved me to play on my part. It galled my vanity to see the disappointment on her face, she who had had so brave a front for her brother's danger. In sooth, I made but an unprincely prince, for such a sacrifice, such fanaticism of devotion! I rose from my chair and bowed, with all that French formality which had already helped to my undoing.

"Madam," I said, "your trouble is our trouble." (Aye, to think of the guile of that Royal plural, and of the hypocrite I was in my blood-guiltiness!) "My debt to this house is great: pray God I may one day discharge it!" My voice trembled. This was the truth at last, and deeply felt.

The old ardour and joy leaped back into her liquid glance. I extended my hand: I felt her delicate fingers touch it with butterfly lightness. Then she curtseyed deep before me; and as she curtseyed kissed the hand that had shed her brother's blood.

The room reeled with me. Confusedly I saw her withdraw backwards. How the quaint creature seemed to have studied Court ceremonial! At the door once again she sank into a reverence, her silks ballooning around her, and next I was alone.

I flung myself into the great chair and buried my face in my hands. What a mortal coil was this! Had I been the spy yon poor Alistair had deemed me, instead of a simple lad between the devil and the deep sea, striving to save his credit as best he

might, it would have gone easier with me. As there is a heaven above me, it was never that I feared to die, but that I could not die this dog's death of a traitor. Stung by misery, I sprang to my feet again, and wandered restlessly about the room, seeking the issue by which, within a few hours, my ignominious flight must be accomplished. For to fly in the night was the only resource my base plight left me.

A curse on these Edinburgh houses, bleakly rising skywards as if in imitation of the barren cliffs! A curse on the senseless custom of setting the guest-chambers among the clouds, where, in civilised cities, lodge only scullions and cinder-wenches!—Sheer depth into the garden below from the parlour-window; sheer depth from the bedchamber to the wynd on the other side, and blank wall at that, without so much as the jut of a cornice for an adventurous foot! I fell to tramping the room again. On every side tokens of the most delicate forethought were as fire to my pain; the very burnish of the silver candlesticks was a reproach. A framed parchment, hanging over the writing-table, dimly glowing with heraldic gold and tinctures, caught my glance. Though it could scarce soothe me to know the name of the house whose hospitality I was violating, yet I felt impelled to look. It was Drummond, collateral of the Duke of Perth; and Alistair, the lad of the rowan-berry, my victim, the head of it at twenty-three. Aye, if he still breathed. What tragedy might not even at this instant be happening in the great, silent mansion?

I gulped another glass of wine and broke a piece of bread, yet could not eat. I looked at my watch.

Eight of the evening—at least four hours of waiting before the household was like to be in slumber deep enough to favour my project of escape!

I took a taper from its sconce and went to examine my countenance in the mirror. I ought to have been flattered to pass so readily for one whose good looks were a byword. The personage for whom I was here had hardly been seen in France these last years; but every brown-eyed, fair-skinned, well-knit, slim lad must bear a family look in a French wig. How heartily I wished myself swarthy and ill-favoured!

I flung me down on the huge bed; then, in a terror lest I should sleep too deep, rose again and fell to writing my confession, for Rachel to read when I was far away. This was a happy inspiration for the passing of the time.

I wrote a dozen letters; and none pleased me. Full of such fine phrases they were, most of them, that when I read again I blushed for them and tore the sheet across and across. At length wearied brain and sore heart dictated between them an abrupt statement of facts, clear of either self-extenuation or penitence. After some hesitation I signed it by my name—which of itself spelt loyalty—and, in a hurry (my pen, it seemed, running without my will), I scrawled underneath it: "Would I had died before this!" I folded the sheet, sealed and addressed it:

"For the hand of Miss Rachel Drummond, in this house."

My task accomplished, a new calm descended on my spirit. Propping my head on my hand, I fell

a-musing. And, musing in a sadness that gradually gathered a kind of sweetness, the feared sleep came upon me. I woke with a start, as if my body had leaped to catch my escaping soul. I had dreamed that I was the lover of Rachel Drummond. It was poignant to find myself, after all, but a kind of traitor, bent on the further treachery of flight.

The great bell of St. Giles was striking some hour—three, I found it, on consulting my watch. The sound welled down the ridge, over the sleeping houses, like water.

Through the window, which I had left open, I could see the bulk of the old town rise to the north, ragged against the faint radiance of the sky. Upon the black mass a few lights were gleaming, gross yellow beneath the pure sheen of the stars.

It was a good hour for my purpose. I was suddenly seized with a frenzy to be gone out of this trap wherein my honour was so grievously entangled. Tiptoe I crept about the room and extinguished the candles, already guttering in their sockets. A small silver night-lamp had been placed at the foot of the bed. I lit the wick. It burnt with a demure glow. I stole to the door—"Like a thief in the night," I told myself, and bitterly carried on the simile in my mind: Of how much I, thief, was robbing this kind house! . . . Of what generous, loyal illusions, of what passionate hopes!

The boards creaked, as they will beneath a furtive footfall. The whole place seemed full of sighs to me. Yet it was singular that I could hear anything, so loud were the hammering pulses in my ears.

On the very threshold my foot struck against a barrier. Had my step been less timid, I must have

fallen across it. Instantly a figure reared itself into what seemed to me giant stature. I saw a flushed boyish countenance looking down at me, blinking in the dim light beneath a short crop of tousled yellow hair. As I stared, absolutely bereft of speech by miserable astonishment, I saw the creature fumble with his sword-belt, straighten his disordered coat with anxious hands; saw him dive for his wig and flusteringly adjust it on his dishevelled pow. And then he stood, a mighty youth, unmistakably a gentleman, bowing deep before me.

"I trust your Highness will forgive," he said in a voice which brought me, with a pang, back to the tavern. "I had fallen asleep at my post."

The passage was so dimly lit by a single lamp that it seemed to harbour nothing but shadows: but towards the end of it (where I remembered the stairs) there came even as he spoke a faint clank, as of a sentry stirring, echoed, or so my fancy had it, by a similar sound from the black depths below.

"Truly," I exclaimed with a bitter laugh, "I am well guarded!"

"Aye," said the giant simply; "had any one sought access to your Highness, it had been across my body. Does your Highness require anything?" he added respectfully, after a pause in which I felt like a drowning man with the waters closing above his head.

I stammered from excuse to excuse. I was restless. Had not been able to sleep. Had had a thought of seeking fresh air in the garden. . . .

He was all eagerness. He would escort my Highness, if it so pleased me. Watchers were posted at every entrance and down the lane. My Highness

might feel quite secure. This youth, Julian—Rachel's Julian, I had no doubt, just nineteen by the pedigree, I remembered—had abandoned the elaborate caution shown by my hostess even in privacy, and gave me boldly the Royal title. It added to my sense of exasperated helplessness. I answered him somewhat tartly that I had changed my mind and desired, above all things, solitude.

Then, my heart misgiving me at the innocent abashed look on his countenance, being conscious, too, that I was playing my part extremely ill, I added hastily that I would be grateful for a glass of fair water, for I was feverish; and on a further thought bade him give me news of his brother. He was a lad, apparently, of few words and simple thoughts, and could scarce give himself time to blurt out that Alistair was a trifle easier, so anxious was he to run upon my errand.

I stood on the threshold as he tramped down the passage, hesitating upon a last mad hope. But, spite of his nineteen years, he was full-grown Scotch in prudence. I heard him pause at the head of the stairs, heard the gutturals of the Gaelic; and a squat fellow in a kilt came swaggering through the shadows, back upon me, to halt within a yard of my door. I withdrew into my room to shut out his solemn, staring eyes. The thought of forcing an escape, at the penalty of injuring one of these loyal creatures was too odious to be entertained. Again the necessity of a timely confession urged itself upon me; yet at sight of honest, eager Julian, back with his brimming glass, I hastily turned over my missive of the night, lest its address should excite suspicion.

The lad begged me with great simplicity to retire to bed, once again assuring me, ere he departed, of the thoroughness of the watch and ward. I could have screamed at the hateful irony of it all.

III

Julian was in my chamber again at the first streak of dawn. It seemed that I was to preside at some secret meeting of my loyal adherents at this early hour. As he was sparse of speech and I ignorant of all I was supposed to know, it took much guessing on my part to discover even so much. All my hints—and I dared not now insist with the peremptoriness I had shown in the night—failed to dislodge my overzealous subject from his attendance. When my toilet was completed he knelt and kissed my hand.

“My brother bids me tell your Highness,” said he, “with his deep duty, that it is grievous to him not to be present at the great meeting. He cannot speak much, even in a whisper, for that it brings blood from the lung—in which, the surgeon will have it, there is danger. But he bids me add that this morning your Highness will at last know his friends.”

It was a long speech for the big lad; and he recited it something as a child his task, his knee still to the ground, his blue eyes fixed on mine, with the look of a dog on his master. I said it was well, as regally as I might. Had I wanted to lay bare the truth at that moment I could not have done so; the current had hold of me; I must with it. Yet when it came to the leaving of the room my feet seemed rooted to the boards. I stood staring towards the window at the square of light, radiant blue against the yellow of the candlelight. Then, as Julian

glanced at me with surprise, I turned to follow him from the room, and my eye caught last night's letter, which, if you will believe me, I had clean forgotten!

"I pray you," said I, on the impulse, "to give this letter to your sister when I am gone—or," I added, in a less assured tone, "if aught should hap to me."

He took it without speaking and thrust it in hiding over his great chest.

Now comes that scene of my life which to look back on is more like the confusion of a dream than aught that could ever have happened. Since then I have joyed and sorrowed as other men, loved and hated, prayed to my God and served my neighbour; but all the drama of my life was held in that single hour, and no moment has ever pulsated since with such poignancy.

I was conducted by Julian, who trod with the mien of one assisting at a sacred ceremony, into a long room on the ground floor. Some dozen people were grouped at the end of it, conversing in low tones. As I entered, silence fell. All eyes were upon me.

I saw Julian meant me to advance, and I advanced. Then the group divided and stood right and left bowing low, each man, as I passed him. I took my seat where it was placed for me, on a chair set with velvet cushions. Whereafter, one by one, they approached and kissed my hand, giving me their names as they did so. It was Drummond of this, and Drummond of that, and Grant of the single loyal branch, and Cameron, and McPherson, Gordon, and McGregor—names that should have been music in my ears had I been he for whom they took me. I saw that they were all youths; scarce a bearded man

among them. And some went white with the emotion of their young ardour; and some deep red, as if the seething loyal blood of them had gone to their heads; but all looked at me with the same eyes of fire. All, I saw, wore the sprig of the rowan-berry at their breasts.

The devil that had spoken for me before spoke up now.

"Gentlemen," said I, "I am glad to be here among ye. But it is given me to understand that our time is short: it would be best that ye should speak first and tell me your plans, for I have come hither, I take it, to do your will."

When I had uttered the words, I thought them mighty cunning, since they invited confidence with little compromise to myself. (I could laugh now to think how, but for the mercy of God, I was knotting the noose about my neck.) There was a sudden clamour among the lads as I finished, so eager was every one to speak. I saw a couple fiercely elbow each other. It was clear that if, as I began to suspect, the man I had wounded was the head of the Young Conspiracy, his presence was sadly wanted.

"Pray, gentlemen——" I began again—the true Chevalier could scarce have delivered himself with a finer mixture of urbanity and command.

As upon my entrance, a quick silence fell upon them, they exchanging looks the while like dogs waiting to spring at each other's throat. And into this silence came a voice—Rachel's voice. Like the far lament of the pipe in the hills, it stole in pure sweetness to my ear; yet before I heard its message I knew that it spoke my doom.

"Treachery!" it said. And again, "Treachery!" And, as the notes of a tune vary on the same motive: "We are betrayed—betrayed!"

The cry came wailing towards us from the passage. Now she stood on the threshold, her delicate hand on the sleeve of a young man who went beside her in silence. All turned and stared at her, and there was a great stillness. She uttered no further sound, but advanced steadily upon us, guiding the youth whose arm she touched.

Of the conspirators, not one but utter astonishment had robbed him of his utterance. I sat still in my guilt as a man may wait, his head on the block, expecting the blow. She came in a white flame of anger, the like of which I never beheld, either before or since. As she halted before me, she dominated every creature in the room. A second her eyes fixed me, as I sat; and then—in her sweet sing-song—she spoke again:

"You are all betrayed, and it is my fault! That man—it was I brought him into your midst—he is a spy!"

There ran a sort of howl about the group. Rachel lifted her hand.

"Here," she said, "here is our Prince!" Clamour sprang up again; deep murmurs. Again she controlled all. "First, we must secure his safety. That man has our secret: he must die."

Then the sluices of fury opened: right and left, blades leaped out of the scabbard. Eyes as of wild beasts glared upon me. Then he whom Rachel had spoken of as the Prince opened his lips for the first time.

"Pray, gentlemen," he said very quietly, "put up

your swords. I do not wish to have blood spilt in my presence."

Even in that moment of fierce tension I had a singularly vivid impression of our Prince's personality. I marked the bright-coloured boyish face, the clear, brown eye turned with cold indifference upon myself; the disdainful lip that dropped the words of clemency—not that the wretched life of the spy mattered, but that to the Royal gaze, blood would be an unpleasing sight!

"Mr. Drummond," said the Prince then, addressing Julian, who stood, a huge, silent menace, brooding behind me—"will you give me the favour of your attention for a few moments apart?"

As the pair drew aside to the further end of the room, the wave of jealousy in the group of boys thus left unnoticed diverted for a moment their attention from myself. Only Rachel, clenching and unclenching her little hands, took yet a step nearer to me, and dropped her sweet-voiced hatred into my ear:

"You must die—oh, you must die! Do not think you can escape death!"

I turned my eyes and looked up at her. I was still seated. Whereupon, moved by what singular intuition I cannot explain, she exclaimed almost in a whisper:

"I see my brother's blood upon your hands!" . . .

The words rushed to my lips. "Kill me then, you!" I would have welcomed such a way out of it at last. But I left them unspoken: some final instinct of dignity kept me to a dumb endurance. And, indeed, though it takes time to tell of them, these events succeeded each other with such breathless haste that a man's thought could scarce follow them, much less

reason upon them. Barely the time for those angry lads about me to shoot their jealous glances away from me after young Drummond, when there broke in upon them a gentleman at sight of whom there was a start of surprise, confusion, I had almost said terror, among the conspirators.

"Murray!" exclaimed the Chevalier in tones of relief.

The new-comer, a middle-aged man of extraordinarily masterful appearance, cast a flaming look from face to face, to end upon the Prince's.

"Aye, Chevalier," he said in low, rapid voice, "you've done me finely, this time, with your secret voyage! . . . Aye, and done well for the cause, too!—Wretched boobies!" he turned back upon the boys, spitting the words in his rage—"you'd be having your own Association, would ye? That of your elders is too slow and too cautious and you'd lure your Prince into the heart of danger, in spite of us? . . . Death! You'd be setting up the throne again, such as you! Aye, and 'tis to the whipping-block I'd send you!"

At which, tiger cubs as they were, you should have heard the growl that burst from them!

"Hush!" cried Murray. With a gesture of sudden warning, his countenance changing indescribably, he lifted a thin voice: "By the Rood, I am too late! The mischief's done!"

The echo of a cry, unnaturally cut into dumbness, was in our ears; next the shuffle of footsteps, stealthy yet numberless, in the garden without, beneath the windows—the repeated click of swords and firelocks. And ere a look could be exchanged, much less a word, among us, a sharp voice rang out in command;

and we heard the rhythmic thud of a score of muskets on the clay of the path.

Within the room was first stupor, then the hard breathing of men determined to the death; but, for the rest, deep silence. Into this silence came, very quietly—with no more trouble indeed than the mere lifting of the latch—some four gentlemen, one in the uniform of the usurper; and in the passage behind them, massing sturdily, the soldiers.

'Twas then that the divine suggestion which was to redeem me sprang into my mind. I was seated, you may remember, in the chair of State; and about me the lads were still gathered, as though I were the chief personage (as, in a way, indeed, I was). I saw now, in a flash, how out of my very baseness I would play the hero, pass for my liege in earnest, and take his danger to myself. Rising, with an air of majesty which this time came unsought, I called out commandingly :

“Surely, gentlemen, is not God with us? Draw, my friends, and let your Prince lead you!”

So saying, I drew with a flourish and hurled myself upon the foremost officer.

Before my point could reach him, I felt as if a rock had been cast against my breast, dashing me, as it were, down some sudden yawning precipice. And, as I fell, I heard a crash as of a world exploding, into the reverberating echoes of which there rang the words: “His blood is on his own head!”

* * * * *

Now, seeing it is myself who is telling this story, it needs no assurance that I did not die of that shot; nor that the Chevalier escaped capture, since ye all

know how he came again later; how he fought and conquered; how he fought and lost. But this secret chapter of his life no one knows but the few that were of the Young Conspiracy itself and those that were present at its failure.

It was many weeks later (for my journey back to life was a long one indeed) that I myself had the last word of that circumstantial enigma. Then I learnt how, chafing in weary inaction month after month at Gravelines—in consequence of the failure of Roquefeuille's expedition against England—the young Prince had allowed himself to be tempted by the enthusiastic pledges of a band of hot-headed Highland youths, and had come over to lend his personal sanction to a new Loyalist movement.

This escapade had been carried through in secret, in utter defiance of Murray and the Highland Association; though, indeed, Murray had been so distrustful of some such coup de tête that a swift vessel of his chartering was at the time actually patrolling the coast to intercept the young Chevalier, if need be, and save him from his own folly. Murray knew how keenly alert were the Elector's police, how well informed both in England and Scotland—as, indeed, events proved but too well. Be it as it may, had it not been for me—whom you may well, in truth, style the "Young Pretender" of that day—there would have been no Prestonpans, no Holyrood . . . and no Culloden.

Now, he who fired at me was not the Hanoverian officer, but a bitter Whiggish gentleman in his company, who thereby thought to perform an act of high policy and cut the Gordian knot of civil strife. But, as the blood of kings is not to be shed with the same

ease as that of commoners, so great an awe fell upon the party when the deed was done, so deep a feeling of responsibility and doubt, that by tacit consent they withdrew without attempting a single arrest. They could not, in sooth, be accused in high quarters of want of zeal; yet none would be in a hurry to boast of a share in such a transaction.—A man may render such monstrous service to his sovereign that he will walk in fear all the rest of his life!

Murray (the wily old fox!) was not like to misuse the opportunity I had given him. I have been made to smile many a time hearing how he flung himself upon my body, placed his hand upon my heart and, groaning aloud, declared his Prince was dead; how thereupon he mouthed his curses upon the regicides and then, it is averred, fell to weeping actual tears; Julian's huge frame meanwhile proving useful in concealing the quiet young man in the corner.

When the gentry had departed (which they did in sneaking haste) all attention was turned to the question of the Chevalier's immediate safety; and not a creature (save one) thought of seeing whether breath remained in him who had proved himself the best loyalist of them all. But she, Rachel—true heart, whether in hate or love—flew like a bird to my side. And never (as I tell her now when I wish to tease) was higher honour paid me than when she left Julian to pour out the Prince's wine, that she might herself coax, drop by drop, through my stiffened lips the cordial that arrested my ebbing life.

I have dim visions of the days that followed. In spite of pain and fever they are sweet. I see Rachel, and that is the first memory, reading a letter by my bed; and I know it is my own letter, and am content.

The horrid web of anguish has gone from me as if it had been but an evil dream. . . . I see, with infinite pleasure, her delicate profile cut against the black of the oak panels. I lose myself in ecstasy over the curl of her upper lip, parted in its ever unspoken question. Then, when the fever ran high again, and I was thought to be dying, her tender face comes between me and the void; her exquisite hand alone holds me back; and Fate gives me the precious revenge to hear the sweet, crooning voice that once demanded my death now bid me again and again to live.

"If you die my heart will break," come the words, murmuring, sighing, sweet like the breath of the wind in the pine-tops.

After that, how could I die?

And presently there are the days when I am very glad to be alive: glad even in the mere flesh of me. It is full spring without, and renewed spring in my blood, and something else which comes but once in a man's years. And the day dawns when Alistair, as pale as I am myself, but earlier on his feet, walks into my room and sits beside me; and our hands meet in the clasp of that friendship I had yearned for in the tavern. He is a grand lad, is Alistair, and I have never liked man so well before or since.

All the news of the world is good. The Chevalier is safe again in Gravelines after his escapade; Scotland is biding her time, as Murray and my uncle would have it; and the Hanoverians have been beaten at Fontenoy.

There falls, too, an evening when Rachel makes me a confession. And it is this: when the soldiers clinked their muskets under the windows that morn-

ing she (deeming this the final outcome of my treachery) had had her hand on her brother's sword that she might kill me. Only the blade resisted her. I tell her that she could scarce have pierced my coat; but she, in her dear sing-song, assures me otherwise.

"I would have plunged it in your heart!" she croons.

Then I tell her she had already reached my heart more surely; and I watch the trembling of her grave, wistful lip, and am deeply happy.

In her mystic way she will have it that it was written in heaven that her house should save the Prince at this moment of his deadly peril. Therefore was Alistair to mistake me for his messenger; therefore was she to mistake me for the Chevalier himself; therefore, above all, was I to be held in silence when I ought to have spoken.

It would ill become me—would it not?—to quarrel with so pious and comforting a conclusion.



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THE GREAT WHITE DEEPS



III

THE GREAT WHITE DEEPS

MR. EVERARD MILD MAY, *cornette* in His Most Christian Majesty's *Gensdarmes Anglois*, had positively not a *louis d'or* left to ballast his pocket. It was not through lack of good pay, for Louis-the-Well-Beloved treated his English company of gentlemen-at-arms—Jacobite refugees, all of them—right royally; but, in Paris or Versailles, gold will slip like quicksilver through a young soldier's fingers. And here was his off-duty week, and payday not till the end of it! He would not borrow: his English pride was too high. Nor were his English wits nimble enough for the plausible shifts a French officer would have found easy.

So Cornet Mildmay sentenced himself to arrest in his little, high-perched, iron-balconied room in the good old house of the Rue Ste. Placide; and after three days of this seclusion, realised that his *ennui* was rapidly growing beyond endurance.

Not the comfortable fireside in this bitter February weather; not the excellent fare (sent up, on good credit, from the *Mousquetaires Gris*); not the last book from England (a vastly entertaining work by Mr. Henry Fielding, "The History of Tom Jones"), could keep the blood of this youth of twenty-three

from clamouring mad protest against such a waste of existence.

And yet some obscure English obstinacy held him firm against himself. He raged, but yielded not.

Never had the thought of the tavern-room, the hazard of dice, or the flutter of the cards been more alluring; never the joy of comradeship so necessary; never had great Paris seemed to be so full of fair women, gallant intrigue, rhythm of music and of dancing feet, as upon this third evening of Mr. Mildmay's voluntary imprisonment.

Impatience positively seethed in his brain, forbade his lusty limbs a minute's rest. Full a score of times had he been out on his balcony, now wrapped in his great red military cloak, now merely in his *douillette*, till the biting air drove him in again. He had watched the sumptuous chariots of La Guiche and Croix sweep with fine curve and clangour into their respective courtyards a little way down the street; he had watched the halting of sedan-chairs before the silent grey walls of the convent opposite—the Ladies' Retreat of St. Elizabeth—and with unspeculative eye had marked the veiled figures slip in through a discreetly opened door.

"Some ancient dames of the Faubourg, beginning to think of their soul now that they have lost their teeth!" he muttered irritably, and flung himself back again to the vain solace of book and fireside, only to begin his bear-walk once more.

And so on to the dusk, when, for the last time, Tom Jones (genial companion who surely deserved better usage) flew from a petulant hand, and Cornet Mildmay, after kicking the logs on the hearth and cursing the stifling four walls, suddenly seized at his

cloak again and was for his balcony, where at least the airs were free.

Notwithstanding the gathering twilight, the world seemed lighter than it had been all day, for a mantle of snow had just fallen over Paris. He looked up upon the slate and crimson sky, then down upon the ancient walls across his narrow street.—Strangely sombre they showed under the white-powdered roofs, over the white-carpeted pavement; and, with closed shutters, a secret, sullen place.

The mystery of shrouded Paris called to him. His heart swelled. This coming night of nights seemed to whisper to him of adventure. And he was tied by his empty purse and his proud resolve!

A lovely stillness was upon the city. All sounds of traffic were muffled; no living creature seemed to stir within hearing; there was only the faint clang of far-off bells tolling the Angelus. The Rue Ste. Placide seemed indeed to answer to its name. The pure frozen air, in its crispness, had almost a taste as of some fresh fruit.

Adventure comes to the adventurous, whether they seek with alert eyes the secret byways of the world, or whether fate carries for them on their unconscious threshold. The only wings required for the flight are high courage in the game of life and disdain of responsibility. When Cornet Mildmay rose from his discontent for the last time at the sundown hour of that 25th of February, 1749, there was waiting for his immediate grasp the first link of a chain of experiences which was to make of that date the most critical of his gilded soldier's life.

As he stood—a vivid patch of crimson against the white and grey background—flicking with his finger little flakes of snow from the iron rails of his balcony, one of the jealously shuttered windows of the convent opposite, slightly below his level, was flung wide open. He glanced idly down; and his gaze was arrested, fixed.

Framed in the grey carved stone, blossoming like a white flower against a background of darkness, had appeared a vision: a girl's face, pale and exquisite, illumined by the cold snow-light as by a special radiance, with dark eyes, wistful—aye, and by all the saints of England, gazing upward, full and earnest upon him!

“Mr. Mildmay!”

The call rang across the narrow French street, in English accent, as silver pure to his astonished ear as the tart air was to his lips. For nigh five years, since his flight from England, Everard Mildmay had not heard his mother-tongue from any but the rough throats of men. From the lips of a woman it fell now with a startling sweetness that gave him the oddest sense of joy. There was, moreover, in the tones a ring of appeal, a kind of echo of fear, which made his generous blood leap.

“At your service!” he called back eagerly; and, forgetting his French Court bow, leaned down towards her, perilously, over the ironwork. “Forgive me, madam, I——”

But she stopped him with a gesture.

“Do not speak! Listen, if you would help.”

Then she herself stopped for a moment to fling into the street below a quick look, which he followed with the sharpened intuition of exceptional occur-

rences. The Rue Ste. Placide, a moment before, had certainly been empty; and yet now two men seemed to have sprung into being down there, out of space—two shapeless brown spots upon the snow, just under their windows. One of them was requesting, in the most natural manner, of the other a light for his pipe.

And on the instant, in Everard's brain flashed the recollection of the many tales he had heard of M. de Berryer, the Lieutenant of Police, and his army of informers, ever at work in Louis-le-Bien-Aimé's capital. *Mouches*, or *mouchards*, the people called these detested spies, who, "like flies," they averred, "appear everywhere, none knows where from; and, like flies, see all around without seeming to look."

Thus, when the girl at the window addressed him again, but this time in French and with a marked alteration in her tone—an affectation of coyness very different from the eagerness with which she had just spoken in English—he would have been dense indeed not to realise that her words were now aimed at the hearkeners below.

"Yes, you may come over—we are fearfully dull. I am so glad you are better!" Then, with a slight pause, as though to emphasise for his ear the next words: "Beware of the cold! Keep on your cloak, friend, when you come, or I shall be angry!"

With a pretty mimicry of shuddering, a coquettish wave of the hand, she closed the window. And the officer, puzzled, yet all aflame, withdrew on his side, even as the two smokers in the street, having apparently succeeded in striking fire, separated again and went back into nothingness.

But it took little time to exchange his *douillette* for the blue and silver uniform, and his slippers for the long boots, to consult the mirror a moment or two, to set the laced *tricorne* at the most approved angle, to fling the end of the crimson cloak over one shoulder—he smiled upon the thought of that quaint behest—to dash, clanking, down the stairs. And then, in three steps, Everard Mildmay was across the street.

Before he had time to raise the knocker the door opened, and he was silently received by the white vision herself. And once more the sweet English voice spoke :

“Mr. Mildmay, the place is watched night and day. You understood. I thank you for that no less than for your courtesy. So you are willing to help?”

She extended her hand; and, as he seized and kissed it and held it still, he felt it first flutter like a frightened bird, then close upon his.

On the pulse of his daring, he looked up and saw the delicate face, half averted, crimson and then grow pale.

“I want help, God knows,” she said, under her breath, with a little catch as of a stifled sob.

In the midst of the wild conjectures now whirling in his head, the young man was chiefly conscious of the girl's loveliness and of her clinging touch.

“Command me!” he said fervently.

She turned and fixed her full glance upon him.

“Ah! I expected no less from you, my countryman; no less from one of your house, Mr. Mildmay of Hildon.”

“You know me, then? How am I to call you?”

She hesitated. “Call me Lucy,” she said.

“Lucy?” The soft name fell from his lips like a caress.

She drew her hand from his.

"Mademoiselle Lucy. Will not that suffice, for the nonce at least?" The shade of an adorable smile flickered on her lips. She gave her head a little toss of pride, then she proceeded with gravity: "Mr. Mildmay has bound himself my knight, and he must lead, or follow, me to-night without question."

Here it was as if she would fain be arch; but something—the same strained anxiety that robbed her smile of all mirth—now robbed her coquetry of freedom.

He laid aside his cloak and hat.

"I am off duty for four days more," he said, suddenly grave also. "Lead and command; I follow."

Thus was struck in the flight of a few seconds, an amazing compact. All the iridescent possibilities floating in his brain when, but a few minutes before, he had given the best approved swelling turn to his lace ruffle, the last sprinkling of scented powder to his side curls *à la brigadier*, were blown away as by a gust from a world unknown. He felt himself standing upon the edge of a current, sweeping whither he could not guess; but for his life he would not forego the plunge!

Mademoiselle Lucy beckoned, and he followed. There was nothing alarming in the first stage—a silk-panelled, much-gilded boudoir, illumined by candelabra. In front of a gay fire, upon the sofa, a dark woman in the late summer of her beauty and very bright eyed. Though her face bore that hard, almost cruel, look peculiar to so many Frenchwomen of the aristocracy, she smiled most brilliantly upon his entrance. Withdrawing the generous display of

shapely feet exposed to the blaze, she curtsied to his bow. As she rose from her bend she stepped on one side and waved her hand.

"Sister Bonnefoy," she said. And then Everard saw a singularly tall nun, who, from her dark corner, slightly inclined her head. Her eyes, he thought, were fixed upon him with strangely watchful scrutiny.

A panting little clock struck six; and as if spurred on by the sound, the Frenchwoman once more spoke:

"Ah, M. de Mildmay! To the rescue of your little compatriot? That is well. Now, not a moment to lose, if Lucy is to escape to-night. Art ready, little one?"

"I have but to slip my mantle on, madame."

The girl's face looked white, almost drawn. The lady tapped her on the cheek.

"Fie!" said she; "and a minute ago we were all so proud of your courage—eh, my sister?" The tall nun inclined her head again, and the young man felt that mystery was indeed closing round him.

"Oh, hurry! hurry!" pursued the lady, bustling. "First we must off with these, our chevalier!" pointing to those great, high-rowelled spurs which, among other old-fashioned accoutrements, were distinguishing badges of the *Maison du Roy*. "For in the ways your valour must tread to-night they would but hinder you. Nay! when you see whose fingers doff them, and when I tell you whose fingers will buckle them on once more, I warrant you that frown shall pass!"

The Cornet looked from the clear-cut face, transfigured with a smile, as bright and as cold as the diamond at its ears, to the girl's bent head as she

knelt at his feet. He saw the tip of her little ear crimson and felt the trembling of her hand. Poignant sweet movement of embarrassment! He stood passive, for ere she had dropped into that lowly posture she had flung him a look of mingled pleading and command, and had laid her finger on her lip.

"And this handsome coat," the elder lady began with fresh gusto. "It would be irremediably ruined on the muddy and difficult way. M. de Mildmay will allow me, I beg, to provide him with one more suitable." And she seized the blue and silver lapels with a firm grip.

A man Everard might have, must have, resisted. But these women! Now, upon his other sleeve was Mademoiselle Lucy's touch, too exquisite to resist. And had he not promised? Like a child he let them pull off his stiff-skirted coat; and like a child slipped his arms into the "wall-coloured" *houppelande* they held up for him between them.

Motionless, the tall nun watched.

"And now," pursued the dark-browed dame, "now for your instructions."

"Indeed!" said the young man with a puzzled laugh. "I shall be glad, madam, of some explanation——"

"Explanation!" she echoed quickly. "I did not promise you that! See here, sir: is not that explanation enough?" She caught Lucy by the chin and turned the girl's face towards him. "And the child is in danger!"

Lucy met his eyes, with pride in hers.

"Yes, in danger," she said in English and with more coldness and decision than she had yet displayed; "and if Mr. Mildmay carries out his pro-

mise of help, he must understand that he will be in danger too."

This English girl must have known the mettle of her countrymen; her words were as oil to his flame. If he had felt a moment's hesitation he was ashamed of it now.

But the French lady laughed aloud.

"And, after all, what is it we ask of the gallant gentleman? It is our woman's way, you see, to romance about the little services rendered to us. My pretty young sir, I am sorry to undeceive you, but this is no very great affair—merely to escort a poor, persecuted child through some lonely passages, for which she wants the help of a man's head and a man's arm—and there are nothing but weak women in this holy place."

She shrugged her shoulders, and let her eye rove from Everard's slightly abashed countenance to the girl's set face.

As she spoke, she had been spreading upon the table a large sheet of paper, incredibly worn, creased and greasy with usage. She now signed to him; and the next moment found him listening to some very concise instructions, which she gave with such an air of gravity that he felt them to be of vital importance.

"No escape through the streets," she was saying. "We are watched, caught like rats in a trap. But, with this in your hands, with your determination, M. de Mildmay, a safe passage for you both—if not above ground, then under ground. You have heard perhaps of the abandoned stone quarries that are said to lie under this side of the town?"

He assented briefly—he had heard rumours, vague accounts.

"Nothing vague about them. Here is a plan of those deserted wastes, those great voids that run deep under our streets and out into the country; and there is a way unknown to any but us. Here it is—see," she went on, running her strong white finger along a wavy streak of red that cut through the irregular fretwork of black lines upon the paper. "It would indeed be hazardous to venture in those spaces without a guide; but with this you have, pray God, an assured deliverance."

Everard took the plan into his hands to con it for himself; the lady leaned over his shoulder explaining:

"Look. Here where this red line ends are our cellar stairs. And there, at the other end of it, one of the many openings outside Paris, where even now a coach and attendants are awaiting the flight of this bird. The way you must traverse is due south, and the distance not more than half a league."

"I am ready," said Everard. He folded the paper and thrust it into his breast.

"Remember who will tie on your spurs of gold again, beau chevalier!" cried the lady then, feverishly. And to the girl: "Kiss me, Lucy. Courage!"

Lucy embraced her, coldly enough, thought Everard. Then, with a sudden turn, ran across to the nun, fell on her knees, and passionately kissed the long pale hand that was silently extended to her. In another instant she was back at Everard's side.

"Let us go," she said. Colour had returned to her face and her eyes were bright: it was as if something had rekindled the torch of her courage. She drew up the hood of her cloak and led the way, followed by her companion, who paused on the threshold to

throw a significant smile across the room at Sister Bonnefoy. The latter still stood and still watched, till Everard went out in his turn. And he thought he could feel between his shoulders the last look of those suspicious eyes.

Through corridors they went, in haste; then through courtyards, down other passages and steps; passed an iron-bound door, and at last found himself in a small low vault, empty save for a lantern ready lit on the floor. There, drawing the eyes, in the opposite wall was a recently made gap yawning into blackness, from which rose an earthy breath, markedly warmer on this night of frost than that of the world above ground.

"Here lies our way, Mr. Mildmay," said Lucy, with a sort of taunt, taking up the lantern and looking, as she spoke, back at him over her shoulder.

"Forward, then," he returned, and took her hand, which struck him with such coldness that it seemed as if all her brave blood were burning in her cheek.

"You will find a brace of pistols in the pockets; also a compass, flints and matches," madame called to him as they moved on. "Were you going alone, sir, I should say to you: '*Service du Roy!*'" But as it is, why——" Her laugh and the grating of the closing doors behind them were the last sounds of the outer world to fall upon their ears. They were engulfed into an awful silence, pointed by their footsteps.

After some minutes of steep descent down narrow stairs they emerged upon wider spaces, and Everard's somewhat scattered wits came back to him. He took the light from the girl's hand and drew her to his side, and then stood to survey the scene.

Here, then, were the first crossways of those mysterious labyrinths, unexplored for ages, whose very existence was all but forgotten by the Paris above; extending under the network of busy streets and the cluster of gardens, palaces, churches, and convents that men above ground called the Faubourg St. Germain. It might have been another world, so completely did these two already find themselves cut off from human life—from life, indeed, of any kind, for not even creatures of darkness, rat or bat or reptile, stirred in the stony depths—so unreal seemed the idea of these endless ramifications of passages leading to unknown pits, extending in every direction. A world like a shroud; roof, floor, and sides, wherever the rays of the lantern struck the soft stone, shone back white as milk; and every void gaped black as death. And over all, for ever, the silence—silence such as is not known in the stillest night under the heavens, the silence that oppresses the soul as with breathlessness, that makes the fall of a drop of water twenty yards away heard as if it fell on the brain.

Moved by the same thoughts, they looked at each other; and as they stood, it was as if they could hear the beat of each other's heart. But when he marked her quivering lip and dilating eye, he determinedly threw off the sense of awe that had crept over him. He smiled boldly at her, took her hand again and pressed it as he spoke, though this was, unconsciously, in a whisper.

"A strange place, sweet! But safer, we know, for us, than the merry streets to-night. Nay, am I not with you?"

She rallied at once, he knew not whether to the

tenderness in his voice or to the comfort of his protection :

"And did you deem I was afraid, sir? Nay, then, it must be the reflection of these pale walls, for I vow I saw you turn the colour of fear yourself. And now," she went on, with yet more assurance, forbidding his attempted approach with imperious hand, "to work, good Mr. Mildmay. Your map, sir, and your compass."

Half piqued, half in admiration of her courage, he made her a bow, the most flourishing that his French Court life had taught him; and then obediently laid down his lantern, spread out his plan, and knelt beside it. As he bent he felt her lean over him, and suddenly looked up again with laughing eyes. And the next instant the laugh died in him, for, catching her face unawares, he caught there the image of terror. The very pulse in her soft throat was beating like a thing in agony. He glanced back at his plan, and for the first time, in the light of what he had seen of these great white deeps, the true knowledge of their perilousness burst upon him. To be lost underground in the endless white mazes—horrible fate! To run vainly, seeking issue, to fear madly, to meet madness at last and die there, like a rat! And how easy to be thus lost!

But what danger, then, so threatened this frail creature that to escape it she must face such terrors? Sobered indeed, he set his compass, saw the needle slowly swing back to repose and at last unmistakably point to one of the smaller galleries. He studied the plan carefully before making up his mind; but red line and needle were true to each other. He picked up the implements, and with decision :

"Come," said he briefly, and then in softer tones bade her take his arm. And once more, in silence they took their road.

They first passed a succession of similar cross-ways, which only required the verdict of the compass. But after a while the character of the surroundings changed. There came a chain of broader chambers where the quarrying seemed to have been more reckless, and where, amid a chaos of rough pillars (built God knows in what ages of the Paris above) that seemed but precarious support for the lowering vault of chalk, it was more difficult to pick out the one way of safety by the red streak on the plan.

A pervading dampness, which up to now they had been spared, was beginning to assert itself in oozing walls, in pools of clear water, at the bottom of which the lantern rays revealed a soft white slime. Thick white mud sucked at their feet as they went; their progress became more and more a matter of difficulty, and seemed to the man to lead them into greater danger. The surrounding pillars presented an ever more crushed and rotten appearance; the low, water-soaked ceilings bulged over their heads, rift in many directions. In front, behind, from all the side galleries, came the sound of long-gathered drops falling from the roof into the ooze of the ground with a faint melancholy plash.

Suddenly, whether from the oppressive silence or the muffled unwholesome airs which drove the blood to his head, a wave of anger, of exasperation, swept over Everard. Was his alluring adventure to be nothing but this mole-like creeping, leading perchance to nothing but a vermin's death? And this still, dumb creature that went by his side, holding her

fears under her pride and meanwhile scarce concealing her disdain for him whom a bend of the finger and a look over the shoulder had sufficed to draw blindly after her—should she not repay him for his folly of submissiveness? Was he not to secure—whatever else these caves held in store for him—the present good at least of kisses?

He wheeled round upon her with a sharp movement: there was a dancing light, not over-sane, in his eyes.— At the same moment, as if a kindred tinge of madness had infected her own spirits, the girl clutched him by the arm.

“Speak!” she cried. “Say something, or the silence of this awful place will make me scream.”

His strange passion broke loose then, like straining dogs from the leash. He caught her to him, and with how hard a grip he himself was all unconscious; and holding up the lantern devoured her beauty with fierce gaze. And he called back to her:

“Speak? Aye, that will I! Tell you how maddening you are, and how, if it be death you are leading me to, I shall not complain so you first make the end of life sweet. Lucy, white witch! Temptress! . . .”

He bent to kiss her; but she flung her hand over her face, and then, with frenzied outward gesture, thrust him from her.

The very feeling of the pitiableness of her strength in his grasp, the sudden trembling that seized her as he had held her, brought him to himself. But if the strength of her woman's body was small, not so that of her woman's spirit. She flamed upon him in such fury that all the echoes surprised and caught the notes of her voice and flung them one to the other till the whole weird region seemed alive:

"I trusted myself to your honour! Is this how my countryman keeps his promise to a woman in distress? Or perhaps you imagine, sir, that the mere sight of you in your red cloak has been too much for my maiden heart, and that was why I have lured you after me? Faith! Then the place of intrigue is well chosen. I need fear at least no rival to distract your attention. . . . Oh, Mr. Mildmay!"

Reproach, indignation, jeer—she rang the whole gamut of her anger. Her words stung him from his shame into a new irritation.

"Madam," he retorted, "I would remind you that it is I who have trusted myself to you. I asked no question. In all this mystery there is but one thing clear to me, and it is: that this seems a strange place for seeking safety."

By the light of the lantern he saw her pale face change. Contempt faded from her lips.

"I warned you of the danger!" she cried earnestly.

"No, Lucy," he returned; "you taunted me with the fear of it."

Convicted, she had not a word. But then all his chivalrous manhood woke up again, and he repented him.

"Never mind," said he comfortingly; "I would do it again, for your sweet sake."

"For my sake!" she echoed quickly. Her eyes flashed a sombre fire. "And do you think I would have brought you here thus for myself? Are you really so simple as to think that a poor girl like me could have enemies so powerful? No, sir, other issues were at stake—something more than life indeed. Oh! we have gone so far, I will tell you now, and it may wake you to a better pride in yourself, sir, than

that which led you to insult me. A cause, a nation's hopes were trembling in the balance. We were in dire straits, knew not which way to turn, pressed for time, when, with a flash of your crimson cloak, came to me the inspiration——”

“My cloak?”

“Aye, sir, your red cloak, after all; and it now wraps, please God, one for whom you should be ready to dye it yet deeper crimson in your best heart's blood! You serve a nobler cause than you wot of; and if you and I both lay down our lives to-night we shall have but given them up for one who has the right to demand them.”

His breath came short.

“Our lives!” He scarce dared understand her. Then with a flash of intuition that seemed, as it were, to start afresh all the settling birds of surmise to wild flight in his brain, so that it was filled with beating wings:

“Sister Bonnefoy!” he cried.

Lucy made no reply; and Everard repeated with conviction: “Sister Bonnefoy!” He remembered the mistrustful, watching eye and the passion with which Lucy had prostrated herself. And his soul was filled with anger.

“My life,” he said, “belongs to the King of France.”

“Right!” she cried sharply. “And therefore reproach me not that I tricked you. For had I asked your help for another King, what then would you have said to me?”

His gaze grew troubled, his eyes dilated.

“I must have said, ‘A man may not serve two masters.’”

"Then Madame de Vassé was right," she said regretfully. "I would have trusted you."

"Madame de Vassé!" he exclaimed.

It was with the name of that notoriously beautiful and self-willed woman that had always been associated at Court the Young Pretender's obstinate refusal to leave France (as stipulated by the Treaty of Aachen); refusal which had led to the disgraceful scene of his arrest but a year before.

"Therefore I did well—I did well!" Lucy resumed and smiled with a sort of triumph. "And now to draw back would be worse than to go on. Let us on, then, Mr. Mildmay!"

"One word more," he panted.

"Not a word!" said she, and forced him onwards.

"But surely," he insisted, "a man has the right to be told for whom he may have to die, and why, and how! I don't understand what part I——!"

"Why, Everard Mildmay," she interrupted with deep reproach, "have you already forgotten you were once a loyal Englishman? Your father's head bore witness to another spirit when last I passed under Temple Bar!"

He was silenced. In very truth he was ashamed to have questioned where he already knew. But he was far from being elated, or even satisfied, with his *rôle*. It is one thing for a man to devote himself—and he would have given the last drop of his blood for the Cause, as his father had before him—it is quite a different thing to be made the tool of another's loyalty. For a long while the Cornet went his way beside his fair companion without speaking; and so strong is human nature that he forgot the many sur-

rounding perils and his responsibilities in a keen sense of personal annoyance.

"I am tired," said Lucy suddenly, and leaving his side went and sat down on a block of stone. Everard looked around him with a start. They had emerged, apparently, from the water-logged area, and were again at some intersecting ways which required the help of the compass. He moved back some paces to place his lantern on a convenient ledge, and was about to stretch out his plan, when a stifled cry brought him to her side in a few bounds.

She was pointing with rigid finger towards the gaping spaces they had just left. At the same instant there was a beat of steps behind him.

He wheeled round. In a second one of the pistols was in his hand, and he was peering he scarce knew at what.

"Halt there," he called in sharp military French, "or I fire!"

Clear as was his voice the words rolled confusedly, and were echoed fantastically through the labyrinths. A black form had already detached itself from the outer blacknesses and crept into the narrow area of light thrown by the lantern some twenty feet away, when the crisp click of the locks brought it to a sudden standstill.

"*Des pistolets . . . gare!*" cried a hoarse French voice, and the figure disappeared behind a pillar. But the only answer to the warning was an angry growl from the depths behind and the shuffle of running feet among the stones. A man dashed past the light: to fall upon his face as the flash of Everard's pistol leaped at him, red and long, with such thundering amid these caverns that it seemed as if

the world was blasted. The echoes had scarce time to send back their counterfeit roar before new clangours broke forth—crash upon crash rending the heavy air; thud after thud shaking the soil. Sounds of collapsing pillars, subsiding roofs, avalanching rocks, broke forth from the great vaults they had just passed through.

Everard was bending forward, his second pistol at the ready, striving through the faint light, made fainter yet by the powder smoke, to see the effect of his shot. The appalling turmoil for the moment paralysed his wits. As he stood rigid, the hand still holding Lucy behind the shelter of his own body, a last crash broke about them, nearer, and with it rang a fearful yell; still more fearfully cut short. And at the same instant the light went out, the world became solid blackness. And the hideous silence settled upon them once more.

As, slowly, the reaction came, and his brain began to work again, he set himself in a half-dazed way to piece together what had happened.

The shock of the pistol-shot had brought down some of these rotten pillars, the instability of which he remembered noticing with anxiety but a few moments before; and the waylayers (whoever they might be) now lay buried under the ruins, with the lantern. The lantern! The whole unspeakable horror of the situation burst upon him. His brow grew clammy with an icy sweat; his breath stopped—stopped, too, the very pulse of his heart.

A warm young voice called upon him; warm young arms clasped him; he felt upon his hand the falling of warm tears.

"We are going to die here, and it is I—it is I who brought you to this! Oh, forgive!"

She held him close, pressing herself against him, and laid her face against his breast. The touch of the frail arms, claiming as it were unconsciously the protection of his man's strength, even while, in her sweet woman's soul, she forgot her own peril to lament his, revived all the manhood in him. The very perfume of her hair, rising to his nostrils in the dark, called up a vision of all the joys of a fair earth, of a beauty of life greater than he had ever realised before. No, they should not die without a fight! The clogging mantle of helplessness fell from him; the blood rushed back to heart and brain.

"Courage, Lucy," he whispered—his lips were on her silken strands of hair—"I shall still lead you out of this, if I have to grope upon my knees. There is not so far to go that we should lose hope."

Her nimble feminine wits leaped to his brave impulse.

"Yes—quick!" she cried. "The flint, the steel, . . . matches!"

Hastily he struck, and the sparks flew in showers. And in their lurid light he saw her fair face, close, eager, almost with a smile upon the parted lips, saw and thought that in all the wide free ways of the world above he had never seen anything more lovely than this flower in the vaults of death. Then darkness fell again, yet for that look, he forgot everything. But under the next flashes the tinder glowed and the match found its fire. He held it aloft and once more they started on their precarious pilgrimage; with many stops, many anxious consultations of the plan by the uncertain glimmer; with much

stumbling over unseen obstacles; with much husbanding of the little store of pinewood splinters; pressed one against the other without speaking, yet with every thought consorting. At last, upon one of these halts, he paused so long over the plan that the little torch burned down to his very nails. He fumbled in his pockets. She heard his breath come short.

"What is it?" she whispered.

"The last match!" He barely breathed the words.

An icy pall had fallen upon them. After a long while she said, very low:

"Then this is death!"

And as the man in him strove still feebly to comfort the woman with deceitful hope, she interrupted him gently:

"No, no, Everard!" And then, laying both her hands against him: "Kiss me," she said, "that I may know you forgive!"

And so, in the darkness, in their living tomb, as they thought, these two poor children kissed. And as they pressed one against the other, upholding each other, each trying to comfort the other, each thinking for the other, Love was borne to them—the love that is stronger than death.

A span—they could not have said whether long or short, for, as if they had already crossed the boundaries of life, the measure of time was lost to them—they stood thus. Then the silence that had begun to roar into their ears like a tide of great waters, was riven by a faint distant cry, like a call of distress across a sea of storm. They started from their trance-like stillness and hearkened: and the sense of life returned to them.

From far away, from some unknown direction

amid the stone mazes, it drew upon them, rising and falling; now seeming to retreat, now to approach, then ever louder, ever nearer—a sort of nightmare howl. And then it became a confused medley of lamentations and yelping sobs, the mad babbling voice of terror. And presently, words, incoherent but distinguishable—English words, by all that was fantastic!—fell upon their ears.

“Oh, Lord! Oh, Lord! Oh, Lord! . . . Lost! I am lost! Toby is lost! Oh, Lord! oh, Lord!”

A moment it might have seemed as if their own fear had taken some devil-shape and was let loose upon them. But the next instant, dancing upon the wall some twenty feet away, appeared a faint gleam of light—a blessed ray. And suddenly, a man bearing a lantern dashed into the wider gallery on the edge of which they stood and began wildly circling round like a frenzied dog, still wailing his mad iteration to the echoes.

With the new hope a keen decisiveness leaped into Everard's soul. He took a step forward, and in a second had cocked his pistol and was taking aim.

“Stop, fellow!”

His voice rang like a clarion. The man stopped as if he had been shot, wheeled round; then with a screech ran towards them.

Everard, his weapon levelled in the right hand, took with the left nimble possession of the light. But, far from resisting, the creature sank to the ground, embracing the young man's knees:

“Oh! oh! take me out of this! You will take me out of this! I am lost, lost—a poor English lad! Those French devils, they set me on guard at a cross-way and left me!—God blast them! I was all alone,

with the whole place falling about! Ugh! And I have been running for hours, hours, and there's no way through, and my candle is burning down! Oh, take me out! If you will only take me out I'll tell your Honour all, I'll give your Honour his revenge."

"Oh! you'll give me my revenge?" said the Cornet grimly. "I think I begin to understand. But I have had my revenge, sirrah. And what is there to keep me from shooting you, too, and leaving your carcase to rot here with the rest of your gang? Strange doings for an honest English lad, to join with French devils to track down and murder an English gentleman! Well, up with you!" cried Everard, as the man with a new howl of despair rolled a shock head against his knees. "Up with you, and on! The wretch is right, Lucy. That candle would not have lasted long, but it will see us through."

And the strange companions started upon their way. Soon they emerged into what, according to the plan, was the gallery opening into the fields of Vaugirard. Freer airs began to circulate, colder and colder; and, though they were now able to advance rapidly, the freezing temperature of the outer world struck deadly chill upon their shaken nerves. Lucy shivered, and wrapped her hooded cloak about her as close as she could. Toby, the crestfallen ruffian, after walking awhile within the circle of light in dejected obedience, began by degrees to pluck up his base spirits as they obviously drew near safety. Every now and then he half turned round to cast upon his deliverers a look of cunning and of singular malignity.

At the last corner Lucy laid her fingers on Everard's hand and pointed to where, across a fallen

block of freestone, a long bramble was stretching in from the outer soil into the shelter of the caves, heralding the end of their journey. He halted a moment to share with her the joy of deliverance written upon her quivering face. When he turned round again their rascally fellow-traveller was gone. Everard looked grave for a moment, but then shrugged his shoulders.

"I doubt," he said, "if even now our poor country could produce a more pitiful wretch. Oh, I understand!" he went on quickly as the girl seemed about to speak. "Here was another wolf upon the trail of blood. Faugh! Let him run and seek his vermin's fate elsewhere. Now, Lucy, to be under God's skies once more!"

As he spoke the flickering wick of the candle fell over, and the light went out. But beyond the jagged opening there was the light of the stars. And in another moment they stood free; the night air, austere in its cold purity, cleansing them from the earthy taint of the quarries.

They stood awhile, close side by side, to taste the ecstasy. Once more they heard homely sounds of life—it seemed a cycle since they had known such things—a dog barking in a distant farmyard, answered by another yet further off; away along a road the trot of some willing horse carrying some unknown rider to some unknown goal; the cry of a night bird startled under a snow-laden bush; then suddenly the impatient stamp of a hoof, the jingle of harness. And, indeed, in the faint glimmer of starlight a short distance away, was seen upon the snow the dark outline of a coach and the gleam of its lamps.

Again Lucy laid her hand upon his. He could

but descry the outline of her face, but she spoke with a nervous ring of girlish laughter in her voice, new to him :

“And now, my gallant cavalier, you will bear me no grudge for one last little mystification . . .”

But pursuing fate had not yet done with them—the words of pretty mockery passed suddenly into a wild shriek.

There was a tearing rush from the brambles, as of a boar breaking cover. Before Everard could even turn round, something horrible, something thick and yet flexible, clinging like an unspeakable living sheet, glutinous, slimy, was dashed over his face, and with fiendish twist rolled round his head, blinding, inexorably choking. It gripped so close that not a sound could escape him. Through his furious efforts to tear off the thing he could hear Lucy scream again. He reeled round, stumbled, fell on his side. He knew that in another minute he would be dead, as surely suffocated as by twenty fathoms of water. But he had barely touched ground before he was again seized upon and raised to his feet, whilst strong hands hastily unrolled the cruel cloth, which clung so tenaciously that it only yielded with a sound as of tearing silk ; to be wrenched away at last, leaving his face streaming with blood. But little recked he of the smarting pain, so exquisite was the blessed air to his lungs.

Gasping and dazed he stood contemplating a scene which was yet further bewilderment. He was now surrounded by a number of men, in the sombre uniform of the *maréchaussée*, that seemed to have sprung in fantastic manner from the soil. Two of these were converging upon him the rays of dark

lanterns, another was supporting the half-fainting form of Lucy; a few paces away two or three more were occupied in tricing up Toby, the honest English lad, in spite of his frantic struggles.

Now one, who was evidently in command, advanced, hat in hand, and bowed deeply.

"Monseigneur," said he in French, "I find that I have been happy enough to be the instrument of saving your Highness's life."

"Highness, sir?" cried Everard, whose wits were still somewhat scattered.

"Your Highness finds us well informed," answered the other, bowing with a gratified smile. Then, with renewed gravity, he proceeded:

"Now, sir, in the King's name I arrest you. I trust your Highness will find less cause for resentment than on the occasion when M. Vaudreuil—my name, sir, is Beuvrey—so brutally carried your Highness from the Opera."

"M. de Beuvrey," returned the Cornet, "I am grateful for your courtesy. But I must tell you you are in error when you address me thus. My name is——"

Lucy had suddenly released herself from the arms that supported her.

"Monseigneur is safe!" she cried, with a wild thrill in her voice. And Everard, remembering her half-confidences, stood abashed, biting his lip. But he was spared the trouble of mending his mistake by the officer's next words:

"By what name, then, will Monseigneur be pleased to be called?" he inquired with another deep bow.

"Since you will have it so," answered the young man, smiling, yet not without a sidethe ght of the

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Bastille, "it is my pleasure to be called Mildmay." Then he added, with a secret malicious enjoyment of his enforced *rôle* of deception, "I may be permitted, I presume, to confer with this lady a moment?"

But the officer interposed hastily.

"Monseigneur will forgive me if I implore him to come with me now. He will have every opportunity by and by, and may rest assured that Madame will receive every attention.—Will not your Highness honour me by leaning on my arm? Monseigneur is much shaken, and no wonder," pursued M. de Beuvrey, "and his face will require the care of a surgeon."

"Yes. And, by the way," said Everard, halting to cast back a look in the prisoner's direction, "that man, my assailant——?"

"Oh, sir, rest assured he shall be dealt with as he deserves. *Sacripant*, with his *masque d'empois*! That birdlime towel, sir—an invention of Cartouche, the brigand. We had thought it had remained his secret. But this man—an Englishman, too—seems to have been an expert at it. Well, I am overjoyed it was no Frenchman assaulted your Highness. He is no doubt one of the gang who meant to earn to-night the thirty thousand livres offered, as we hear, by the—by some one in England for the head of——"

"Of Mr. Mildmay, I suppose," said the Cornet, ironically.

"Of Mr. Mildmay," assented the police officer, respectfully. "When His Majesty was informed that a price had infamously been put upon your head, he was anxious that the arrest (to which treaties bind him) should not be delayed, were it only as a means of safety. We could, of course, have carried you

away from your retreat in the convent of St. Elizabeth; but the King is desirous to avoid any such scandal as that of last year. And then we knew—the police know most things—of your intention to come out by Vaugirard quarries. Yonder scoundrel seems to have discovered your Highness's intended movements also; for this man was undoubtedly one of the emissaries charged with . . . he had, I find, a canvas sack and a butcher's knife about him!"

Upon this last startling item of information they had reached the coach, into which Everard was assisted as became his supposed rank. The officer took a seat facing him; and then, to the young man's joy, Lucy was ushered in beside him.

"Forgive me, sir, for presuming to give orders in your own coach," said in honey tone the elegant police officer. "The King has selected Château-Gaillon as your Highness's permanent residence, but to-night, to save you fatigue, we stop at Vincennes. The carriage will then convey Madame back to the House of St. Elizabeth."

And now the carriage, surrounded by a small mounted escort, rolled rapidly away, circling round Paris outside the barriers.

In the semi-darkness Lucy sought the young man's hand and pressed it; and while M. de Beuvrey discreetly looked out upon the starlit snow, she brought her fresh lips to his bleeding ear and whispered:

"Everard, to-night, while they are looking for their prisoner here and wasting their time on us, Sister Charles Edward Stuart is posting towards the sea in the cloak, hat, and spurs of a *Gensdarme Anglois*, and to-morrow night, pray God, embarks

safely. Now you know all.—Nay, listen still: you must soon be liberated, but meanwhile nothing you could say would convince this man of his error. You do not mind remaining an august person yet a little while? You have sped your prince towards his throne, perhaps . . . and you have earned the gratitude of Lucy.”

“Only gratitude?” he whispered back eagerly. But by the flickering glow from the carriage lamps he saw her smile, and it was a smile full of sweet promises.

* * * * *

After two days of respectful detention, one in a travelling chaise, the other in the decidedly tolerable duress of Château-Gaillon, Cornet Mildmay (who had wisely reiterated his protestation that Mildmay was indeed his name) was released from custody—with a somewhat sudden decline of ceremony but not without soldierlike cordiality—and brought back, at his Majesty's expense, to his door in the Rue Ste. Placide, just in time to get ready for a resumption of duty.

Upon his bed he found a parcel containing the borrowed articles of uniform (with one exception), and two letters. One was signed “Sister Bonnefoy,” and contained some singularly ill-spelt phrases of vague and haughty acknowledgment; it was tossed on one side with something of disappointment and impatience. But the wording of the other brought a glow to his cheek and a gleam to his eyes:

“When will my preux chevalier come across the way to have his spurs of gold buckled on once more?”

He rushed to his balcony. The shutters in the

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grey walls opposite were open, and the white vision rose against the dark background.

A few minutes later the Cornet, cloaked and dressed to regulation, though still spurless, was knocking at the discreet door of St. Elizabeth.

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MY RAPIER AND MY DAUGHTER

NOTE: A Dramatic Version of this story was written for Sir Henry Irving by the author, with Mr. Walter Herries Pollock

IV

MY RAPIER AND MY DAUGHTER

I

IN the year 1595, Master Vincent, the rapier and dagger man, kept his school in the narrow-fronted but substantial house in Knight-Rider Street at the south-west corner of Paul's Chains. It faced on three ways; for behind it ran the blind alley, Garden Lane, so called because it abutted against the enclosed gardens at the back of Baynard's Castle.

The building was tall. From the topmost gable-room, looking down over the serried roofs that seemed to slide on the slope of Blackfriars towards the Thames side, there was a fair view of the wide water-way, with its innumerable craft, its ceaseless animation; and, looking up towards the great heart of the town, one could see the Gothic buttresses and the unrepaired steeple of old St. Paul's.

This upper and retired room was Master Vincent's own sanctum, reserved to the great man's personal intercourse with the more advanced scholars, or with those of special quality. Here were precious secret thrusts revealed with due solemnity; abstract

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points of honourable difficulties philosophically made clear.

Tyroncs were handed over for their rudiments to one Heronymo—the Provost, as he was called—Master Vincent's lieutenant with the foil, and his trusty factotum besides. Their practice took place in the lower room, a wide apartment raised some few feet from the level of Knight-Rider Street; wonderfully light and airy for a city house, lit by high, broad casements on the three sides. There, between two doors—one leading to the upper sanctum, the other opening on the stairs—the wall was fitted in rows with trophies of fencing weapons. At the further end was a broad pilier, cased with wood to man's height, used for hacking and thrusting practice. A few benches and a table provided with a standish and writing materials, completed the furniture of what was known as Saviolo's Academy.

For some years already the neighbourhood had grown reconciled to the rousing din that at certain hours proceeded from the open windows of Master Vincent's house; had ceased to wonder at the high-pitched Italianate yells, the round English oaths of his scholars: at their *Hay-la!* . . . *Have-at-thee-now!*—*Yes?*—*No, sirrah!* *Here, then!*—*A hit, by St. Paul!*—*Aha, the punta-riversa!* Indeed the clink and clash of steel, the stamping and shuffling of feet, and ever the joyous catches of laughter, had become recognised as a part of life's music in Paul's Chains. It heralded good business to ostlers and to keepers of taverns or ordinaries, for your young fencers' thirst and hunger require more than usual attention; to sword-cutler and loriner; to draper and haberdasher, for your poking rapier-play is fraught

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with rents to wearing apparel; aye, even to human skin! Sundry surgeon-barbers, in fact, and more than one apothecary in Blackfriars had seen competency doubled since the settling of Master Vincent in Knight-Rider Street, at the sign of the Sword Hand.

Whether or no Master Vincent—or rather, to give him his full designation, Signor Vincentio Saviolo—possessed that invincible skill which, in a teacher of fence, would amount to genius, at least there was no record of his defeat in any fair encounter, whether at sharps or on the prize-stage. And if, like all newcomers, he had bitter detractors, his pupils, one and all, swore by his name. In any case the anglicised Italian was by far the most prosperous man of his calling within the Queen's realm—perhaps, indeed, in the whole of Europe.

The mere fact of having struck steel and discussed knotty points of honour in Saviolo's own rooms was in itself a brevet of fashion. The high fees he exacted were eagerly paid. The house at the crossways was thronged with young Templars and courtiers, with town gallants and country gulls, thirsting, some merely for cunning tricks of fence, others for the latest and right proper cavaliero sword-and-claek deportment. More, in fact, wished to drink in the magnificent stranger's lessons than his time and temper would accommodate. At any rate he would of none but youths of coat-armour: of such only (he was wont to assert) could he make "your true captains of compliments." William Shakespeare was well acquaint with Saviolo's "inner room scholars" in the Blackfriars days; with

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“the gentlemen of the very first house, of the first and second cause”; with “the very butcher of a silk button” himself.

Midsummer Day in the year of our Lord 1595 was to prove a red-letter date in the fulness of Saviolo's career.

A tall, thin man of forty years, sallow of face and brown-red of hair, with sharp, stern features, deep-set grave eyes and thick brows—point-device in his dress though always in black—Master Vincent stood contemplating with suppressed delight (for he was, by long practice of decorum if not by nature, self-possessed even in the solitude of his own company) a freshly printed, newly bound book that lay open on his table, exhibiting the title page :

VINCENTIO

SAVIOLO

HIS PRACTISE

In two Bookes

*The first intreating of the use of the Rapier
and Dagger*

*The second, of Honor and honorable
Quarrels*

This volume (fraught with the subtle joy known to the composer of a first book and most of all to the *Homo unius Libri*) he had just brought back from the shop of John Wolfe, the printer thereof, in Paul's

Churchyard. With extended finger he turned over the pages, verifying the catch-words; then harked back to the dedication, and half-aloud read over its opening words:

To the Right Honorable, my singular good Lord, Robert Earl of Essex and Cwe, Viscount Hereford, Lord Ferrers of Chartley, Bourchier and Toubain, Master of the Queen's Majestic's Horse . . .

then let his eyes be lost, bathed in a solemnity of satisfied pride, over the distant view of shimmering Thames at rising tide. His keen glance noted amid the throng of craft the streamer of a particular barge, and recognised its gay colours and the matchless swing of its oarsmen.

"My lord in person, returning from Greenwich," said he to himself. "I will even be in time to greet him on his landing."

He took down from the wall his gilt-hatched rapier—latest pattern of Bolognese seven-ringed hilts—and, left leg braced, bust erect but head negligently bent leftwards, with that natty, defiant, one-action gesture which alone was worth a broad piece for any gallant to learn, hooked it on the carriages at his belt. Next he placed the book in his pouch, on the other side, under the guard of his shell dagger; then, with hand on sword depressing the pommel until the tip of his scabbard was as high as his shoulders, proceeded grandly downstairs.

It being near the hour of midday meals, there were but two occupants left in the practice-room:

the newest scholar and Heronymo, the Provost. Both were still hard at work; the latter frowning, with words of speeding or correction; the former sedulous, and panting with passes and lunges at the hacking-pillar. They stopped and bowed as Saviolo silently passed through; and whilst Heronymo ran to open the outer door for his master, the scholar followed him with his eyes, critically marking the inimitable bearing of head and shoulders, the rhythm of spurs, the negotiation of corners, steps and doorways, which the now horizontal length of the great man's scabbard never once encountered.

The door closed; Saviolo proceeded towards Essex House by the Outer Temple. Meanwhile, within his school, the rudiments of rapier fight were resumed.

The stroke under study that morning was the *punta-riversa*, Saviolo's triumph of deadly neatness in the art of returning cut by thrust. After a minute the scholar—one Hal Greene, a pert, squat young Templar, drew himself up.

"Now, Heronymo, a truce!" he cried, passing his foil to the left hand and mopping his brow.

The Provost shrugged his shoulders. He was a dry, spare, black-avised man of outlandish mien and accent; of small stature—yet second only to Saviolo in point of sword repute.

"Rest!" he growled. "Holy Cavaliero St. George! And pray, young master, hope you ever to master the noble mystery of arms?"

"Marry, do I not? See how I sweat!" returned the youth cheerfully.

"Come, master, to your ward!" the Provost ordered gruffly. "Perhaps the great Saviolo may not remain so long with ye that you can even reach the last link

of his precious chain of passes and finctures
Higher the fist, sir, as I ever beseech you! And the
nails upward! Sink on the hams. So! Verily this
pass is the most precious, mark me, to make hand
and foot in concert seek the mark chosen of your
eye. Know it but truly and ye shall count with your
point the buttons on your enemy's doublet, whenever
it please you."

On the words of this flattering promise the door
was opened and there entered briskly a tall youth of
some five and twenty years—fair-haired and brown-
eyed, best type of English manly comeliness. He
was arrayed in the latest courtly style, yet wore the
short walking-sword which, in these days of lengthy
tucks, seemed oddly old-fashioned.

In the new-comer Heronymo recognised, with
dubious interest, one Edward Strange, a gentleman
attached to the household of the Earl of Pembroke;
of gallant reputation, as he knew, but reputed also to
be intemperately prejudiced against all Italianate
manners in general and a sworn contemner of new-
fangle rapier-play in particular.

In this lad of mettle—who, be it noted, in my Lord
Pembroke's household passed also for a poet—the
old English style of fence found an uncompromising
champion; one whom, up to this midsummer day,
nothing had been able to induce even to cross the
innovating foreigner's threshold.

But if Heronymo for one fond moment believed
in a conversion of the arch-detractor of Saviolo's
worth, he was promptly disabused. The youth
stopped in the middle of the room, and, without even
doffing his cap:

"Now, even as I thought!" he exclaimed. "No

need to seek you far, Hal! At your antics as usual—at the scratching and the ramping with your what shall-call-it, your *imbrocade, reverse, inverse, foh! Per-verse!* Apish tricks, lad, that never yet stopped an honest English right-down blow!”

All this was said loud, with a sneer aimed at the scowling teacher. Lower, but in earnest tone, he added:

“Harry, I must speak with thee. Come!”

But Heronymo here stepped angrily between them.

“Not so! Your ward, young sir! . . . This is no Paul’s Walk for meetings and greetings and idle chatterings. The left knee bowed, master!” He gave an authoritative tap of the foil on Greene’s left leg; then, turning upon the intruder: “We have business, sir, if you have none. Life is short, and the art . . .”

But the young lawyer’s curiosity was stirred. He strode to the wall and replaced his foil on its nail.

“Nay, worthy janitor of the Long Art,” he interposed complacently and with all the pedantic air of the school, “though life be short, I’ll no more to-day! My hand and foot in concert,” he added, mimicking Heronymo’s professional gesture, “crave a release. And now mine eyes would fainer seek the mark of a red lattice, and count the hoops of a fair ale-pottle, than the buttons on the paunch of my bitterest enemy. Give us leave, good Heronymo. So!”

The Provost retired in dudgeon and busied himself over some broken foils. Meanwhile the pupil, moping and dressing himself, rallied the new-comer whose countenance displayed unusual pre-occupation:

“How now, friend Strange and strange friend,

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what make you in the school of the 'frog-pricking Italian,' in the sanctum of the 'new-fangle meretricious rapier'? Have you——"

"Hush!" interposed the other earnestly. "I have strange news indeed! Do you mind the fair face we saw, the starlike eyes that shot such mischief to my cleft heart? Do you mind her of the divine throat, who, with Hebe's grace, yet Venus's own loveliness——"

It was the Templar's turn to interrupt.

"Ho! ho! Now, now!" he exclaimed with a guffaw. "The pretty wench at the window in Garden Lane? Why, yes: some merchant's Moll or shipman's Sue. Ned, Ned, it is your brain that's cleft. . . . Yet I grant you she was a comely queen enough. I have not seen her since, yet do I mind her well."

Here he blew a kiss from his fingers with a flippant air.

"A truce to jest, Hal! I want your help. Yes, in sooth, coz, I am in burning earnest," whispered the gallant, drawing his friend by the arm and looking darkly over his shoulder at Heronymo. "Listen: the lady is of this house! Of this house! I have seen her at this very window."

Greene looked askance; then, after a moment's reflection:

"Fantasy, pure fantasy!" he asserted, smiling indulgently. "Both sun and moon have told upon thy pate, Ned. Art indeed stark; and thy vision doubled even as thy poor cleft heart? 'Tis well known Saviolo hath no womankind, tolerates none. He is wedded to his white rapier—aha! And, by her, father to half a score of admirable offspring. Well-christened too, as thou knowest," he pursued, follow-

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ing the vein of far-stretched conceits which were the mode of those years. "There is the fair Mandritta Saviolo, Stoccata the nimble, and Imbroccata the resolute, and Riversalva the sly; also Falsomanco, and the sturdy Passadosotto. Ha, ha!—eh, Heronymo? Oh, he needs no other family!"

Strange could barely contain his impatience.

"I tell you she was here," he said decisively, and thereupon fell himself into a prolixity german to his own temper. "'Twas from that window I saw her lean out, rare in her beauty as the virgin moon from the skies, fresh as a rose in early dew—no later than this morning. It was as the bell of Paul's gave seven. I had paced the lane from sunrise watching the casements you wot of, but there it was," pointing once more to the window, "there, from the foreign swaggerer's own room, my life's light shone forth! And, by the heaving of her breast, I know for sure she sighed as she gazed into the blue. And methought, as she was called back by some brutal voice, she looked most piteous and appealing for help."

The young men had approached the window in question.

"Here," resumed Strange, "rested her little hand, white as first snowflake on grimy earth. Think you still I saw visions?" And, bending, he sentimentally kissed the sill. Greene laughed outright.

"Heigho! Poor Strange! Nay, then, if you will not believe me, satisfy yourself with other witnessing," he said, and then called over his shoulder: "Heronymo, here!"

The Provost, who at his mechanical work had kept suspicious eyes upon their secret consorting, rose with alacrity:

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“‘Here’ is for a dog, sir, but let it pass! Well, masters, Heronymo is here.”

“Then hear, Heronymo,” Greene went on, still with his best modish affectation of speech. “What beautiful damsel is it that haunts these male-sacred purlieus, and rests her snowy arms on this window-sill; bends a face lovely as virgin moon, blushing as the dewy rose—it is rightly said so, eh, friend Strange?—from that casement of a morning?”

At the very first words the Provost had suppressed a start. “Plague on ye for prowling cats!” had been his angry thought, as with stubborn mien he scanned the gallant’s inquiring countenance. But in spoken words he only made answer:

“You please to be merry, masters. There are no women here.—Womankind!” he asserted again doggedly, “my noble master hath none. Will that suffice?”

“Hearest, Ned? Said I right?” whispered Greene. Then, genially: “And thou, Heronymo?”

“I, master? Nay, trouble enough without! None here. Not a patten, not a farthingale. We have no women here, nor ever shall. And so, your leave, sir.”

“Here is mystery,” whispered Strange to his friend. Then arresting Heronymo as the latter was moving away:

“Who, then, was it, *honest* man,” he called with a sneer, “stood at that window—that window, mark you, in your noble master’s house, this very morn, at the stroke of seven?”

The Provost stopped short, and remained a moment silent. “The little jade!” he was thinking. Then he turned round with well-assumed looks of wonder:

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"At the stroke of seven?" he repeated. "At that time I was strewing the rushes. None but myself was here. The window stood open, true: I may have looked forth. In faith I mind me now I did."

Once more did Greene's great laugh ring under the rafters. He seized the Provost by the shoulders and thrust him forward.

"Here, then, haha! is the mystery solved! Sweet coz, behold the rosy moon! Ha! Ha! Feast once more thine eyes on its virgin beauty! Kiss the snowflake hand!"

With a malediction Heronymo freed himself from the irrepressible Templar's clutch.

"I have no time for jesting, and 'tis close upon noon, when I go forth for my meal. The school now closes, masters, I pray you——"

He significantly pointed to the door. The twelve strokes of midday were beginning to throb from Paul's belfry into the room. Greene, who had finished his dressing, now began to hustle his friend.

"Come, Ned, Heronymo says right, and 'tis noon."

"I tell you," retorted Strange, scowling suspiciously around, "the fellow says wrong. Here is mystery! My heart cries out there is foul wrong done here; here, at the sign of the Sword Hand, that I must and shall be even with."

"And I tell thee here is hunger! My maw cries out there is a fair fowl done there—there, at the sign of the Tankard, that I must and shall be even with!"

And, laughing, he pushed his still protesting friend through the door. Heronymo listened to their voices, dying away upon the stairs to ring upwards in loud-

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ness once more for an instant as they passed down the street below the window. He remained yet awhile musing in the silence which had returned to the fencing room; then shrugging his shoulders, he sallied forth in his turn.

II

Half an hour after the meridian Master Vincent had just concluded a brief but gratifying interview with my Lord of Essex, and was embarking at the Temple stairs. The noble patron had graciously insisted upon his own galley taking back the signor to Blackfriars. The tide still flowing, the return journey was slow; but Master Vincent was full of engrossing thoughts, and the tardy progress of his lordship's oarsmen caused him no impatience.

He had received the praise of the gallant Essex, a good judge if there was one in the land, on the new-blossomed work. He had even been assured that the Queen herself, who ever commended pursuits of manliness and chivalry, would have occasion to cast her royal glance upon the learned pages. In short, he was riding the high tide of life. Wealth he was rapidly achieving, and repute second to none; and now honours appeared on his horizon. It was a great day. Yet there was a cloud or two in the purity of his sky, the shadow of which tinged with vague trouble the fair colour of his meditation.

Men, Saviolo could always manage, whether in counsel, fight, or argument. But he had a daughter—his own daughter, in sooth, for southern, passionate strength of blood, albeit she had taken from her dead English mother her fairness of looks and her blue eyes. On Francesca, a chit of eighteen, the

stern man centred a whole-souled love, disguised under a transparent garb of severity. The child had been brought up by friends in the sweetness of Kentish orchards—and the father's flying visits thereto had been the landmarks of joy in his life.

Of late, however (knowing that the threshold of womanhood is fraught with untold dangers) he had, in his solicitude, thought it safer to have his one priceless treasure more immediately under his eye. And from that moment all true peace of mind had departed.

Following his Italian notions, which some twenty years of English life had not eradicated, he had cloistered the fresh country girl in a retired house, next to his school, in Garden Lane. To the father of a too handsome daughter the spring-gallants of a rapier-school were even as ravenous wolves unto the shepherd. Strict therefore were his precautions concerning secrecy. That the news should ever go round—"Master Vincent hath a fair daughter!"—would have been disaster indeed.

Master Vincent, however, had (as he complacently believed) solved the problem. An inner door, secretly contrived between the topmost rooms of the houses, enabled the father to consort freely with his child without being seen to cross her house door; none were in the confidence but Heronymo and an old nurse, the duenna. And thus Saviolo had flattered himself the pretty mystery could be preserved till the maturity of time!

Of the girl's faithfulness to her promise never to let herself be seen, or even to enter the precincts of the fencing-school, he entertained no doubt. Yet Saviolo was anxious. The life that hides a secret

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ever carries a burden. Since Francesca's coming to London he had ever been haunted by dire possibilities, fretted by apprehension. And the child! She had wept that morning to go on a fair free barge, like other maids, and had flung her mask upon the floor in bitter, pettish fit that had pierced the father's heart as never blade was ever forged to do. In short, he was beginning to foresee, with fresh sorrow, a fresh parting, yet without finding the courage to resolve on it.

Another thought (all Saviolo's thoughts that were not of his daughter were of his rapier), one of lesser import, yet vexing as trifles are apt to be, came ever and anon further to disturb his self-satisfaction—that young Strange!

It was but a few days before that Master Vincent, with the appreciation of the true adept, had watched him play his "Master's prize against all comers" in the great halls of Baynard's Castle, under my Lord Pembroke's own patronage. What a swordsman so mettled a lad could become, were he but properly taught! . . . Nay, Saviolo's triumph would never be complete until he reckoned this fencer of matchless promise among his own scholars.

Yet, with what unwarrantable scorn had the lad received his courteous invitation to visit the school at the sign of the Sword Hand, and there acquire, in addition to native gifts, the higher sword-skill of Italy! As he recalled the haughty rebuff, Master Vincent tasted again all the savour of angry resentment in his mouth; and the shadow of Baynard's Castle seemed, in his meditations, to eclipse the brightness of Essex House itself.

Little did he think when, landing at Blackfriars

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stairs, he began pensively to ascend homewards, weaving these alternately grey or scarlet thoughts of rapier and daughter, that the two vexing problems of the hour, so little connected thus far, were to be solved that very midsummer day, and with unexpected quaintness.

* * * * *

Like the forbidden fruit, the forbidden door will ever be an irresistible temptation. All promises notwithstanding, who could in his heart condemn a too solitary daughter of Eve—almost a child—for yielding?

During the few weeks that had elapsed since Francesca had been brought to London, the tension of repressed curiosity in the midst of idleness had become well-nigh intolerable. On this fateful morning, Saviolo having in unwonted abstraction left the secret door open when he had sallied forth early to receive the promised precious book from the printers, the fever of forbidden ventures had proved overpowering. True, the venture itself had been brought to premature conclusion by Heronymo—stern respecter of orders; but the short glimpse Francesca had had of the strange, to her quite fantastic, sword-room, of the ruffling young courtiers' playing ground, whence arose such extraordinary harmonies of manly sounds, had but served to whet her interest to sharpest edge.

As soon as silence once more reigned in the house, the emboldened maid, profiting of the duenna's slumber during the noonday heat, crept once more down the inner stairs; and, like peeping mouse, looked into the room. Then, defiantly, she stepped in.

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Well might Master Vincent think it wise to keep this alert, merry-eyed, red-lipped girl, rich already in fair womanly lines and richer in promise, away from the inquiring gaze of those ruffling gallants his scholars!

She paused a moment and bent a pretty ear to hearken. Then, reassured, with almost childish glee, she began to inspect every detail, peer into every corner; read the name of each scholar and scan the coat-of-arms over each set of rapier and dagger foils, wondering if one of these might not well belong to the comely youth who this morning had doffed his cap with such a look of startled wonder as she had met his glance through this very window. If she dared look out again! But no, her father might upon any moment be passing through the street. . . . Stay! The Garden Lane casement was safe. Her father never walked that way; and he, he of the cornfield-coloured hair, of the beseeching eyes, so often did! She moved on tiptoe, and peered out.

Yes—oh, dear mother of the loves—yes! There was the gallant youth again! But, with hands resting against the wall, what was he doing? . . . Writing on tablets, and ever and anon casting a glance upwards at the little, high, barred window of the neighbouring house . . . her window! In the hilt of his sword is thrust a knot of dark red roses. . . . O, the spite of Fate, will he never look this way! The golden minutes are fleeting, gentle sir. . . .!

Francesca's bosom heaved with her quickening breath. Suddenly, almost as instinctively as a caged bird will sing at sight of a free mate, in clear young voice she began the verse of a song known to every maid that year—little wotting that below there stood

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the very author of the sweet words, Edward Strange
the poet :

*There is a lady sweet and kind—
Was never face so pleased my mind!
I did but see her passing by,
And yet I love her till I die!*

At the first note the watcher started, turned; and, with flashing eyes, recognised the singer. Without a moment's hesitation he himself took up the second verse :

*Her gesture, motion, and her smiles,
Her look, her voice, my heart beguiles!
Beguiles my heart, I know not why—
And yet I love her till I die!*

And while he sang his gaze never removed its earnestness from her face. The lad's manly tones, deep and true, were troubling delight to the maid: she threw her heart at him. In such guise do unknown lovers meet in dreams, and forthwith talk of love as of a thing long avowed.

"No, no, kind sir," Francesca was answering. "'Twas no angel sang, but a poor caged bird. And one, indeed, much affrighted." (In sooth stolen interviews are fraught with terrors.) "Oh, my lord, go! 'tis veriest madness! Yes, yes, I will take your flowers, but haste. . . ."

Short as was Edward Strange's sword, its point, now stabbing the bunch of June roses, could reach as high as her outstretched hand. She snatched at the posy, then fearfully drew within. A small folded sheet lay between the flowers. It was tied with a silken point torn from the writer's doublet.

Francesca dropped the roses on the table, and,

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As she came to the end, reading ever more slowly, eyes dim with sweet emotion, a distant sound of gay voices, a clanking of steel, awoke her to a fresh sense of her position. Time was fleeting—the school might be invaded at any moment! Her eyes fell on the standish and the array of quills and gilt papers. She tore off half a sheet, and bending her fair bosom over the table, wrote trembling, yet—such wings does new awakened love lend a maid's imagination—glibly enough :

Your words are sweet and glowing as the flowers that brought them. I cannot say thee nay! Yes, Francesca will admit you to her presence whoever you be, for her heart tells her a true heart speaks in you. She is a prisoner ; but watch, watch—if this posy falls from the window of the school then know that ye shall find her within. Yet, beware! Oh! beware, how you venture, for should the dread Saviolo aught of this discover all would, in very truth, be undone! So be prudent if indeed you love the poor caged bird; her gaolers watch her keenly.

The clank and mirth was gathering closer outside. A knock at the street door made Francesca start. She ran to the Lane window, hesitated, flung forth the note, kissed her hand ; and bounding like a deer, reached the inner door and disappeared just as Master Vincent entered, followed by Heronymo and three or four eager young men who had been awaiting the lesson hour.

He stood a second on the threshold looking at the closing door through which he had just seen the last flutter of a gay-coloured skirt. Saviolo's countenance was forbidding. As he had, just now, passed before the entrance of the Lane, he had noted in that usually

deserted spot a young man's figure posted in an attitude of observation under the school's window. And nothing but the greeting of his pupils, whom he accidentally met at that very moment, could have prevented his instant interpellation of the suspicious stranger. Thus, even before he had entered the house, was suspicion all aflame. There his first glance had detected his daughter's disobedience. And now, on the table, a glow of gorgeous rose-leaves loudly claimed the eye.

Without a word he strode forward, took note of the torn leaf of paper and the still wet quill; and for a moment, turning over one of Francesca's forgotten flowers with the tip of his fingers, remained musing.

"Heronymo," asked Master Vincent in a low voice, "which of our gentle scholars wrote here lately?"

"None wrote whilst I was here, Master, and I was here last."

Saviolo moved to the window, cast one swift glance out—the mysterious watcher was still there—then came back into the room. Saviolo's wits were as prompt to resolution as his dagger and his rapier to parry and to thrust.

He turned to his expectant pupils. In choice words of civility he craved their pardon: "Only matters of gravest import," he assured them, "could make him wish to remain alone in his house this day. Of their kindness and courtesy he implored their immediate departure."

"And thou, Heronymo," he added, when, with salutations, the last of the wondering disciples had taken his leave, "must this day in my stead attend Master Shakespeare who awaits me at the theatre. Haste! I bide here."

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And now he waited.

Not for long. Into the stillness of the room there came a little patter of approaching feet; a pause, the creaking of the door and then the pretty patter entered the room itself. Concealed behind the practising-pillar, motionless, the father saw his Francesca flutter up to the table like a bird, and, with a small, birdlike cry, catch the roses to her breast.

As she turned she met full his grave though not unkind gaze and stood paralysed with the terror of the detected.

"Daughter," he asked gently, "what dost thou here?"

Francesca hung her head, hid the flowers behind her and stammered:

"Father . . . I know you did forbid me to come here . . . but so, you see, father . . . why, thus . . . I am ever your dutiful daughter,—yet I came. . . ."

"Faith!" he answered indulgently enough, as strong men will do when rebuking a child, "a most excellent argument and of most convincing clearness—but well?"

"Look you, father, the day is passing hot . . . and your great, long room here strikes pleasant cool and fresh."

"True," admitted the father. "I grudge thee not the cooler air, God knows. But there's danger here thou knowest nothing of—poor motherless one, I have to take a mother's place by thee!" And, with sudden tenderness, he took the girl's face between his hands. "Canst thou not have patience, my Francesca? Saviolo works for thee: each stroke of his white rapier rings out red gold for his daughter's dowry. The day is not so far when his jewel will be

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brought fair to the light, to shine in its proper setting. Thy father shall then find fit mate for thee. Come, kiss me, sweet! Confess what dost thou here."

The maid flung her arms round her father's neck and rested her head on his bosom.

"Thy roses have a sweet smell, daughter," said he gravely, after a pause, "whence came they?"

Francesca disengaged herself. "Indeed, father, I know not, I . . ." she faltered.

"What riddle is this?" Cold disappointment was now in his voice; severity in his eye.

"The roses?—I found them here—I mean——"

"Found them here! Blooming, no doubt, among these steel blades, planted in the fields of yonder escutcheons!" exclaimed Saviolo, with hard voice of sarcasm. "Why, girl, these tags do whip thee untrue to thy face!" he pursued, taking the flowers from her hand and angrily shaking the silken points. "I would have forgiven all but deceit! Go, go, back to thy room, Francesca! I would not speak with thee, now that choler is my master. Anon! Go!"

There was no appeal against the stern gesture. Francesca fled, weeping.

III

Master Vincent paced the room once or twice, in sore perturbation; then suddenly flung the posy from his hand as if it had stung him. The gentle guerdon flew through the open casement. From the quiet lane below rose a half-suppressed cry.

Saviolo sprang to the window; the alley was deserted from end to end. Cursing his own dilatoriness, he stood a moment irresolute. Now, the door

of the school was flung open; and in dashed the gallant figure of the very youth he had looked for, clasping against his purple doublet the self-same knot of crimson roses.

Edward Strange stopped dead short, as if the fierce smile with which Saviolo received him had been the point of a sword at his face.

But, the next instant, the master's countenance changed and was twitched as though by a spasm of pain. His eyes upon the roses, he was hearkening to a bitter inward cry: "What! Signals and assignments! Shame, my Francesca, thou that hast thy mother's eyes! . . . Oh, my white bird, couldst wing so low a flight?"

Then he spoke:

"By Saint Paul, why 'tis even Master Strange! How now, gentle sir? Are you come at last to seek a lesson from the juggling foreigner? Body o' me! 'Tis like to-day to take the form of seasoned wood. Hand down, young man!" he ordered, raising his threatening voice yet one tone, as Strange instinctively laid his hand on his hilt, "for I will speak with thee, and thou shalt answer first."

The bewildered youth had involuntarily stepped back one pace. Now, furiously clenching his fists, he came up close:

"'Fore God, you are right," he retorted. "You have to speak and even hear me speak! What I came here to seek, that know you well. We are somehow betrayed, and you have lured me with my lady's own dear signal. Aye, Master Vincentio, I know, all the world knows, you have no wife, nor child, nor sister. But you have a prisoner you've hid well—ah, have I hit thee, master? But there is a

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God for the helpless. Be I this day His instrument, and, strong in my righteous cause, rescue the wronged!"

As Saviolo listened to these hot words of youthful chivalry, his face relaxed, grew wondering; its anger faded. It was with almost a friendly smile that he answered:

"Thou rollest forth some very mighty sounds, lad; yet, to my dullard ear, but little sense. Pray tell me, in plain words if you can, where you gleaned materials for this piteous tale; for, in my hearing, it runs as the very babble of madness."

"Signor Saviolo," said the young man, between his set teeth, "I know your secret."

"A very midsummer madness!" replied Saviolo in pleasant mockery. "What now, my Amadis of Gaul? Go right thee wrongs elsewhere; for, believe it, there is no call here for thy derring do."

"Now do I brand thee liar!" hissed the champion, crossing fierce glances with his enemy as he would have crossed murderous blades. "For 'twas but at noon this day I had speech of her; I cast roses up to her and craved a meeting. And this she promised, so she could but evade her gaolers—another hit, Signor?"

"Enough!" cried Master Vincent, drawing black brows together. "And who art thou, that would dare come between Saviolo and whomsoever it pleases Saviolo to keep from the world? Go! I give thee thy life. Fly, sirrah, but forget thou hast ever seen Saviolo's prisoner!"

"Not so, by my father's sword!" And the youth, stepping back, bared his broad blade. "We are alone before God. I challenge you to combat before

God. And, as God rules all, so rule He now the fight! Could I desert her field without striking a blow, then were indeed life wasted on me!"

"The cockerel croweth loud—but croweth to good purpose," muttered Master Vincent to himself, ever more pleased, in spite of all, with the lover's chivalrous bearing. "But, pray you, valiant sir," said he aloud, "before you smite me with your mighty weapon, answer me first one question: To what higher estate would you raise this same poor captive lady . . . when you have conquered me, and thus delivered her?"

"Ah, it wanted but this," exclaimed Strange, "to fill the measure of my righteous hate! Oh, man, whatever guilt toward her may lie upon your soul, to me she will ever be all stainless. Have I not seen her face? Gentle maid, what would I make of thee? My lady, my loved wife!"

Saviolo was fain to turn half aside to hide an irrepressible smile. "I'll swear," was the thought singing joyously in his heart, "I've not met a truer knight in all honourable England, nor a more valorous. Aye, he who would beard Saviolo himself in his den, and face his rapier for a woman's sake, is almost worthy of Saviolo's daughter. . . . Sweet poet and sturdy fighter . . . he believeth not his fame!"

"A noble flow of words, indeed," he said, aloud, and feigning coldness. "Art a most brave youth . . . in words!"

"No more!" cried Strange, making the air hiss with his menacing blade. "Draw, sir, or even now I strike!"

Saviolo, pleased to his fill, stepped to the table, took up his rapier, and released it with leisurely

grace. Then, balancing his dagger in his left hand, he fell on guard and smilingly received the reckless onslaught.

But, although he smiled, never in his life had he fenced with more intent watchfulness or more closely brought his experience to bear upon his science. His slender double-edged blade was, towards the point, keen as a surgeon's knife: let but one unlucky stroke meet the lad on his headlong attacks and it might even cut the thread of Francesca's coming happiness. Aye, he would spare this gallant's blood—aye, even for its own sake. Yet it was imperative (so Saviolo thought) that this suitor should find out the worth of Saviolo's rapier, even as he had discovered that of Saviolo's daughter.

"Methinks," said the peerless swordsman, "I mind me now thou hast a very homely scorn for the new-fangle rapier and its apish tricks. . . . Despite all, shalt take lesson of Saviolo." Here with his dagger he parried a furious lunge; then, with equal ease, took a murderous cut upon his hilt. "Now, about those silken points of thine—it offends mine eye to see thee partly shorn. 'Twere neater to have none, or so it seems to me."

And, nimbly traversing right and left in front of his opponent, with the extreme edge of his blade he severed in quick succession the remaining points on the disordered doublet.

"These twain upon thy sleeve," he went on, bantering, "they have a lonely look!"

Now he evaded another stroke by the most unexpected *incartade* which placed him on his adversary's flank; and, upon the instant, sliced off yet another ribbon.

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By this time Strange was beside himself with rage. The skill which could have traversed his body a score of times or more, which could have slashed his face and hands, was yet nothing to the skill which thus spared, yet left its scornful mark at every stroke and in touches as delicate as a lady's scissors. Better to lie weltering in blood than to be played with thus, defeated and yet protected!

"Draw blood, Saviolo! . . . Wound, kill!" he panted, "but leave these devil's pranks!"

Upon this cry he bounded like a panther—and would instantly have been impaled upon the despised foreign steel had not the master mercifully raised his point and contented himself with receiving on the joint blades of crossed rapier and dagger the cut that was meant to cleave him to the chine.

Then, in a trice, followed one of Saviolo's most precious "inclosings," the secret of which was imparted only in the inner sanctum and belonged not to the practice-room. Rapier and dagger were dropped, clattering on the floor; but, in the same second, the youth found himself disarmed and helpless, his own weapon, he knew not how, in his adversary's hand and its edge resting, thin and cold, on his own throat.

But, far from carrying the lesson to its grim conclusion, Master Vincent gave the young man a good-natured push which sent him reeling back; then stood smiling (not without a little malicious complacency) upon the unwilling pupil, who, breathless, tore at his breast in futile despair.

"Thus it is done," said Saviolo's voice.

There came an echoing cry behind:

"'Tis done! My father's slain him, and my soul

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bears the guilt!" And Francesca was upon them like a whirlwind.

Saviolo, passing the conquered sword to his left hand, caught her up in his arms.

"Look, silly bird," he said.

She looked and saw her lover standing before her, all-ashamed of tattered garments and a whole skin. And in the revulsion of feeling, between laughing and sobbing, she hid her head and cried again:

"Oh, father, father!"

Then did Edward Strange awake from his fantastic dream.

"Father!" he echoed, struck his forehead, stared aghast at his whilom enemy, who now over the girl's fair head was contemplating him with grave eyes. "Oh, blind fool!" he went on, thinking aloud, "this, then, is the mystery. No wrong, but a most simple tale." His wandering hand met his empty scabbard. "To draw upon her father! Ah, now may I give up all hope indeed! . . . Alas, Signor Vincentio, how have I borne myself with you!"

"In truth, mighty ill with thy weapon," answered the Italian with a small dry smile; "but with thy heart, Edward Strange, as well as ever I could wish to see a—son of mine."

"Sir?" murmured the boy, hardly daring to catch at the hope the words held out.

Francesca raised her face to shoot a quick look at her father, and then hid it again. Her sobs were suddenly stilled.

"Look up, pretty one," said Saviolo, and Strange marvelled to hear the stern man's voice take so gentle an inflexion. "Look again—thou art a fas-

tidious wench: couldst ever give thy favour to so dilapidated a swain?"

And Strange felt all the blood in his body rush to his cheek under the roguish glance which now was shot at him from the shelter of the rapier-man's arms. But, if Francesca made no reply in speech, the pressure of her clinging hands conveyed her clear meaning.

Master Vincent shook with genial laughter, and his face became ever more benign.

"And you, young master, are you of a mind that Saviolo's beloved daughter could be as much to you as Saviolo's suffering prisoner?—Then here's a hand would mend more tattered fortunes still."

He disengaged the tender fingers as he spoke, then held them out lying on his own strong black palm.

Strange sprang forward. But before he could touch the lovely prize Saviolo had drawn it from him, and, folding his daughter closer than before, looked at him grave again, if not a little severe:

"He who would rob me of my daughter must first learn to guard her. How would she have fared to-day if——"

He did not finish the phrase, but held out the captured sword and delivered it into Strange's advanced hand. This was done with a grace conscious of conferring favour. And, indeed, it was to the youth as if he thus received his honour back.

"In truth, sir," said he, colouring deep, yet looking back into Saviolo's eyes with brave glance, "you have already taught me more than one lesson to-day. Yet, I think, Signor Vincentio, I could learn further still, would you but receive so feeble a scholar."

A smile of gratification came again on the swords-

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man's face: at last was the one homage he lacked laid to the worth of his school!

"So then, it is a bargain," said he, at last, briskly. "I have misused you much to-day, my gentle scholar. But your mettle likes me, and you need not despair. What say you, Francesca? The day thy unskilful lover shall hit thy father, fair and square, on the breast, in a courteous bout, that day shall see thy betrothal——"

But the girl had torn herself from his embrace and turned on him with petulant eyes and quivering lips.

"Why, father, father!—that means never! Oh, do you play with me, too?" And her tears welled up. "Do you offer but again to take away so quickly?"

Consternation was now again writ on both the spring faces; the autumn countenance of Saviolo, however, was once more lit by a gratified smile.

"Comfort ye, my child," he returned, with gentle meaning, "stranger miracles have taken place! I may be, as Will Shakespeare hath it," he added, stooping to pick up one of Strange's silk points, "the very butcher of a silk button—yet am I no butcher of young hearts."

On the following day, as Master Hal Greene came up Godliman Street, bound for the sign of the Sword Hand, he encountered Edward Strange. He noted with curiosity that his friend walked down the middle of the way, with a certain air of self-consciousness; and that, on his hip, instead of the former

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well-known ostentatiously broad-bladed sword, was balanced, somewhat uncomfortably, a slender swept-hilted rapier of unmistakable Italian length.

"Yes, Hal—it is even so," said Strange, smiling, with a slight blush. "Call it a conversion, call it a wager with fate, or anything you will; but, as you love me, inquire no more till the wager be decided."

* * * * *

On Lammas Eve, in the Hall of the Inner Temple, there was played a prize at sword and dagger. The function was well attended, for it was well known that Master Vincent himself would fight a bout with one of his most favoured scholars, Edward Strange.

To the amazement of every one—or nearly so—the hitherto invincible rapier-and-dagger man was hit; once only, it is true, but most palpably, by the scholar.

Her Majesty, who graced the occasion with her presence (no doubt by my Lord of Essex's persuasion), expressed approval of Signor Vincentio's mastery of the elegant weapon; she was indeed observed to handle and apprise it with a grace of her own as she discussed the merits of the new fence in Italian, loud and clear, that all might hear who list.

And she, no doubt, fully appreciated the master's explanation of the scholar's lucky stroke:—The successful thrust was an *imbroccata* (following the fincture as of *falsomanco*), pushed in guise of *caricado* by a pass and *botta lunga*. It should have been avoided by a timely *incartata* and promptly punished by the *punta riversa*. But the youth's nimbleness, it seemed, had been too sudden, his eye too precise. . . . In sooth, it was a right fair hit!

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So thought Her Majesty, for she patted the winsome young swordsman on the cheek when he was brought up to her, and vowed he was worthy of his master.

But it was noted that her countenance evinced less sympathy when Master Vincent, pointing to a happy-faced wench in grey and scarlet taffeta amid the crowd of bystanders, announced Edward Strange's approaching nuptials with his only daughter.

THE GREAT TODESCAN'S
SECRET THRUST



V

THE GREAT TODESCAN'S
SECRET THRUST

I

Oh, come not within distance ! Martius speaks,
Who ne'er discourseth but of fencing feats,
Of *counter time*, *finctures*, sly *passatas*,
Stramazones, resolute *stoccatas* . . .
Oh, by Jesu, sir (methink I hear him cry),
The honourable fencing mystery
Who doth not honour ? Then falls he in again,
Jading our ears : and something must be sain
Of blades and rapier hilts, of surest guard,
Of *Vincentio* and the *Burgonian's* ward.

JOHN MARSTON, *Satires*.

IT was close upon noon, hour of the ordinary
at the Bolt-in-Tun, that noted tavern over
against Ludgate, by the Fleet.

Hither a goodly company of your cavaliero
gentry, whether captains of fortune or "town gulls,"
were wont daily to forgather, intent as much upon
the gleaning of foreign news as upon the savoury
promise of dinner. For the common-room of the
Bolt-in-Tun was rarely devoid of some new great
man, fresh from overseas experience and full of tales
as a hen is of clacks. Here might you at all times

reckon upon the diversion of stirring stories of Bohemia or Eldorado; of Castile's splendour and cruelty; of border onsets and leaguers; of outbreaks and camisadoes in Portugal or Muscovy; of boatwrecks, wrecks, and discoveries about the Spanish Main—admirable and much-admired adventures which nevertheless seemed, as a rule, to have left their heroes none the wealthier, saved in fine-chastised outlandish oaths.

But this day (the last of September in the year 1602, forty-fourth of Elizabeth's reign) the ruffian community at the Tun, old and young all lovers of a blade, was too deeply engrossed in the topic of the London hour to have much interest to spare for travellers' tales. Yet the latest oracle—a man tall, grey-bearded, of freebooting manner and conscious truculence of mien—was not only well prepared (as his attitude testified) to fill his post with due relish, but, unlike many of his kind, bore evidence of having really countered many hard knocks of fate. One hollow orbit and a gash that had shorn his weather-beaten countenance of the best part of an ear, not to speak of a left hand reduced to one finger and a thumb—each memento of adventure might in its turn have served for fitting introduction to some tall story.

For the moment he sat in moody silence, his single eye roaming, fierce and wary, from one to the other of the eager faces about him—watching for the chance, it seemed, of springing upon the talk and then holding it as his own. From time to time he lifted the ale-pot to his lips with that mutilated hand of his that yet showed menace in its pinch. At

length a scanty stock of patience seemed, of a sudden, to fail him; he raised a voice that drew every eye upon him:

"Vincent again!" quoth he. "By the curse of Mahound, who may this Vincent be that ye all should be gathering, in thought, like so many rats, to-day round his carcase? Let us talk of living men, my springalds, and let the dead go rot! For, by your laments, I take it that he's dead in his bed even as any old woman—this same gallant Vincentio Saviolo!"

For an instant there was that pause round the table which marks the hearing of some monstrous pronouncement; then a sudden clamour among the huffing crowd, a scraping of boots and spurs as sundry started to their feet, a mouthing of oaths, a jingling of cans as others turned upon their bench to confront the blasphemer. It required all mine host's persuasiveness to quell the rising threat, aided, no doubt, by the steadiness of the adventurer's single orb that looked with much mastery out of the tanned visage.

"I pray you, masters, no tumult here, and on this day! And pray you, good Captain Strongitharm, you should know that the name of Vincent Saviolo, the great master of fence, who died but yestereve, is one we speak here with respect. Where shall he be mourned more than at Bolt-in-Tun, which has sounded to his tread daily these twenty years?—But you are from foreign parts, captain, and have not known him."

"'Twas the tallest man of his hands, at all manner of weapons, but above all at rapier play," asserted a gallant from the end of the table, and made in

dumb show, with his two forefingers extended, sketch of a pass with sword and dagger.

"The subtlest arbiter in all matters of honour and difficulty," cried another, older and grave. The comium was capped by a mincing youth with a Court air about him:

"A most noted favourite, look you, of her Majesty. Her Grace liked above all things to be heard tripping Italian with the gallant signor. Ah, her Grace knew a right proper man!" added he, and smiled as one who had his reasons for saying so.

"Aye, aye," commented mine host genially, glad to see the vexed question like to be settled by way of tongue only, "and, of late years, Master Vincent was likewise a friend of my good Lord of Pembroke's."

"And I'll tell you more," interposed a raffish blade from the 'Friars, much bedizened, if somewhat out of elbows: "one who first put a rapier in Master Will Shakespeare's hand—one who was himself the 'butcher of a silk button' (O rare!), as Mercutio had it in the play!"

Captain Strongitharm's little, fierce eye, which had mellowed under something like amusement, suddenly became fixed upon the doorway.

"Here come two as goodly youths," he asserted into space, "as I have seen since I landed! But by Saint Paul, whence do our honest English lads get knowledge of these foreign antics? In my time, an elbow in the stomach was the way to settle precedence if doorway was scant for two."

"Aha, now!" exclaimed the gallant who was out of the Court, "these same antics, as you call them, are as a point of honour with all scholars of our lamented

Master Vincent; and all the more punctiliously observed by yonder pair that, from the friends they were yesterday, they have become rivals to-day."

"Say you so?" cried eagerly a young gull from the other side of the table. "How so, fair sir?"

"Why, 'tis the sole talk in Paul's Walk this morning. Have you never heard? Robert Beckett and Dick Wyatt are (by Signor Vincentio's dying wish, expressed to my Lord Pembroke himself) to contend for the reversion of the master's honours in the 'Friars, aye, and of the mastership itself at the academy!"

All glances were now turned towards the door, to gaze upon the two who had assumed so sudden an importance in the ruffling world. The question of courteous precedence had been settled, and the shorter of the new-comers advanced into the room with a slow step and an air of gravity that seemed to sit uneasily upon his comely, sanguine countenance.—A goodly youth, as the captain had it: broad-shouldered, sinewy, his bright brown eyes seemed made to match a flashing smile.

"Master Robert Beckett, a student at the Temple. Good Kentish stock, sir," murmured mine host confidentially into Strongitharm's split ear. "And behind him, sir, his friend, Master Wyatt."

"A tall galliard," commented the adventurer, "though less of the gentleman than your Templar."

"Aye, good, sir," assented the other, still under his voice; "your perspicacity has hit in the gold. 'Twas a mere City 'prentice till some good dame marked him for her heir, and, dying, left him rich."

"Master Vincent's two best scholars, Sir Traveller," here interposed a typical Paul's man, with long

tooth and ragged lip, fixing on the veteran aggressive stare, and speaking loud as one in haste of stirring up the drooping spirit of fight. "They are the lads to take up with you for the fame of Saviolo's academy."

Under the insolent look, the old man's blood fired again. He struck the table with his sword-hand.

"Good lack!" he cried testily, "Saviolo, Saviolo, I've a surfeit of the name!"

As the words rang out, Master Beckett halted and faced the speaker. Then, with measured action, unhooked his rapier and clapped it, still sheathed on the table. Not brutally, mark you, but with that nice hinting of declared hostility that was to be learned in the inner room of Saviolo's academy where the more recondite points of honourable quarrelling were studied.

After which he sat down in silence, half facing this contemner of the revered master. Stillness had fallen upon the room. Even the drawer hung in the doorway to watch progress.

A gleam of new appreciation appeared in the veteran's solitary orb. For a while he gazed upon the Templar; then, slowly smiling, raised his tankard and saluted.

"'Twas right gallantly done, young sir," he said. "Don Lewis Pacheco de Narvaez"—Spanish pronounced with exaggerated lisp—"Don Lewis, who follows the footsteps of the great Carranza—mirror of cavalier perfection—never put the countercheck quarrelsome with better grace! You mind me of him, fair youth," he went on paternally. "Has

travelled doubtless? Nay, I'll swear thou hast met him. None but your Castellano, say I, to open a difference with the right martial scorn."

"Sir," retorted Beckett, with some harshness, giving his beaver, as he spoke, a bellicose dent with his knuckles, "I claim no travels, and therefore no Spanish schooling. Nor have I known a brighter mirror of honourable bearing than Master Vincent Saviolo, whose loss we are this day lamenting."

"Saviolo!—Why, 'tis as the burthen of a song!"

"And this," the young man interrupted, of a sudden overboiling, "I am ready to maintain with disputation, and eke with my body, against any soldado or capitan who will walk!"

"Well crowed for a cockerel, fair sir! since crowing there must be, yet—mark me—somewhat too loud at first point of quarrel. Hast come to the challenge already, and upon a lie circumstantial only? And as for thy retort, it lacks first element. 'Nor have I known,' say you. How couldst thou know? Hast not travelled. Cockaigne is fair enough: 'tis not the world. How old are you, boy? Thinkest thou, because thou hast achieved fair London skill in thy rapier, couldst already have the whole art and mystery of fence under that saucy cap?—which same thou mayest as well remove at this stage, lad, for I will not fight thee."

"Nay, then, sir, 'twere fitter not to dispute when there is no readiness to prove."

The retort, given in a tone of doggedness, was capped dryly enough:

"Aye; 'tis easy for April to challenge December. Time was—look you—when I would have met not thee, but this Saviolo himself in proper wrangle and

disputation. Aye; I would mayhap have confuted passes with suitable blade-logic! Wilt thou fight for thy teacher's sake?"

He stretched out his left hand as he spoke, laid it, not unkindly but with some authority on Master Beckett's arm. Ere the lad could flinch at the touch, he caught sight of the maimed stump and reddened.

"Aye," went on the old soldier resignedly; "this was my dagger hand—a halbert at the infallible Pamplona palisades! 'Tis gone; fit for nought but the holding of a pipe or the ringing of a coin. Without your dagger, these days, your rapier's strokes in counter-time are nought. To such as your broad bilbo"—he jerked his thumb towards the basket-hilt that hung behind him on the wall—"the only thigh companion. Plain cut and thrice the less occasion for it the healthier. For in fighting—as one of your mastery, fair sir, full you know—he who trusts long to mere defence will but to be hit. 'Tis the onslaught wins the duello. And to what manner of onslaught, think you, master, will this timber lead me against thy lusty legs?"

As he spoke, he hoisted himself from the bench, thrusting his figure into a burlesque attitude of defiance, and it became plain to all that his right leg was nought but a wooden stump.

A murmur ran through the room, followed by a general shout of laughter; but the old man struck at the wood with the knife he was brandishing, and lumbered back to his bench. Then, after surveying the piteous makeshift for a missing limb with an air of melancholy philosophy, he turned his shrewd eye once more on the youth's abashed face.

"Time was!" he repeated, between a sigh and a laugh. "I be now but a hulk, towed into harbour at last, from long journeys, unfit for fresh cruises. But what though? A man may be no more for jaunty quarrels, yet he may speak——. Ho there, Thomas the drawer: bring me a quart of burnt sack, put me a toast in it, and place it me by my young fellow's elbow!—Nay, lad," he added with a kind of paternal authority, "but you shall have a nooning-cap with me."

"Oh, sir——" cried Beckett, and his lips trembled upon words of regret that failed to form themselves.

The drawer had returned with the brimming tankard; the roast crab bobbing, a little brown island, in the frothing amber of the burnt sack. The young Templar seized the cup, and, pledging the donor with his frank glance, raised the draught to his lips. Then, removing his rapier from the table, further doffed his cap with pretty deference.

Dick Wyatt, who had watched his rival's behaviour, fruitlessly racking his brain the while in search of some right proper cavalier-like sally of his own, here followed the example, if more awkwardly, and sat down on the other side. Strongitharm looked from one to the other with benevolent interest:

"And so you two boys are rivals for the great prize!"

The glances of the two young men met. Blue eyes and brown flashed a second like blades. Then, upon a common thought, were veiled with dropped lids; and both boyish faces coloured deep.

"It was the master's wish," said Beckett then. "He could not choose between us."

Wyatt tossed his fair curls with sudden defiance. " 'Twill be a rare sight, Master Traveller," quoth he, with not unbecoming arrogance. " Trial in the 'Friars at rapier single, rapier and dagger, rapier and cloak, the case of rapiers; on the scaffold, under the Lord Pembroke's ordering. Ah, and under the Grace's own eyes! We have six months to be ready against the match."

And again the young eyes met.

Captain Strongitharm cast round the table a glance of triumph. In spite of the counter-interest, he was at last the leader of the meeting. He chuckled in his beard, cleared his throat, and now took the lead that was his due:

" Having heard you, sirs, there even comes to me a regret that I knew not this Master Vincent. (It was soon after the great year of Cadiz that I sailed from home.) God, no doubt, made him a good man since the youth of England loved him so greatly. Nathless, what know ye of other lands where cunning at tricks of point and edge is as common as potency at ale-potting is among us? What know ye of lands where the long rapier is the true staff of life?—For, hark ye, in these days, your Signor, your Don, your Mounseer find a commodity of secret foynes better equipment on a walk through the town than the best-lined pouch. No gallant worth looking at that has not killed his man! There, every captain of fortune and eke every private gentleman, if he weathers the thirtieth year unscathed, must needs be indeed a master-sword. Aye, believe me, he who would set up as a master, let him have met abundance of cunning blades—not scores, but hundreds! More to learn every year, north and south. If it be not

in Antwerp, then in Milan or Madrid. Now, where in England——”

“I greatly marvel, sir,” put in a gallant, huffily preparing to rise, “at hearing an Englishman extol the foreigner’s valour over his countryman’s.”

II

They had their time, and we may say:—they were! Don Lewis of Madrid is now the sole remaining master of the world.

BEN JONSON, *The New Inn.*

The veteran’s eye lighted with a flash. He was about to make a scathing reply, but checked himself and resumed his didactic tone:

“Valour? We speak of fencer’s skill, not of the soldier’s fight natural, wherein (who should chronicle it better than I, Captain Strongitharm?) our English do excel at push of pike and swash of good back-sword. We speak of the duello. It has rules of bearing galore: aye, and surprises endless, as on any chessboard. And no man may say that he has encompassed them all. Great he may be, even as your dead Vincent . . . till a greater be found.”

Eager, the circle now hung on the words. None more eager than the two young rivals, who had edged along the bench till they pressed the speaker on either side. Brown eyes sparkling, white teeth flashing, Beckett flung a breathless question into the first pause:

“Who, then, most experienced captain, since”—dropping his voice in melancholy loyalty—“since our Vincent is no more, reckon you, is the true master of these days?”

The fine old wreck of venture was now launched upon the waters of garrulity. He turned his single eye towards the rafter, as if he could paint thereon some vivid images of memory.

"Ah, who shall say?" he went on with gusto. "Not I, till I have seen all those who would be called masters, brought together in one pit matched as cocks are in battle royal. Aye, there is now of the peerless Narvaez of Madrid. Yet have I known others as magnificently spoke of. There is Petty Jean, the Burgonian, look you . . . and Seigneur St. Didier of Provence. And we hear much of Caizo the Neapolitan and Tappa, Milanese . . . and of Mynheer Joachim, best famed as the Grimald Almayne . . . and I have known Meister Eisenkopf, alias Mastro Capoferro of Bologna—a valiant Valiant? They are all valiant as cocks, on their own ground! Ever, when I hear of a new might and peck-and-spur, I marvel what would happen of them last, could they both meet on the same dunghill. I knew one, especially, of late; and, by Saint Paul, were I a youth again, with limbs and eyes and blood fit for prowess; were I one of those that are ever readier with proof by stoccata than with word argument, with slap of cloak at the face than with sweet words of plumed hat . . ." He struck Beckett on the shoulder with the mutilated hand in friendly mockery to emphasise his words; and at the same time (not to leave the eager boy on the right out of his amenity) gave Wyatt a sly thrust of his wooden leg under the table. Then he proceeded: "Were I one of your wild cats, say I, 'tis not to Don Lewis, nor to Thibault of Antwerp, nor yet to Cavalcabo of Rome that I would hie me—though Cavalcabo was

a man . . . ere he was slit to the heart by one Fabricius, a Danish gentleman, all about a matter of wager in fencing argument. To none of these . . . but to one like Maistre Todescan, of Geneva."

Now, it was singular to note how, at this point, both the scholars flung a furtive glance towards each other, arrested midway, and modestly dropped again upon their can. Singular, too, the abstract air they assumed; and the tone of indifference in which Dick Wyatt presently asked:

"And what countryman was he, worthy captain?"

The veteran, who, lost in fond retrospection, had been meditatively twirling his tankard to stir up the last drop of sugar, tilted it finally, smacked his lips, and was off again:

"Would I could say of such a manqueller: he is an Englishman! But no. They call him Todescan! Ho, ho! I once met a corporal in Piedmont they called Espingola, who was the longsword-man of a German company. Now . . . an he and my Todescan were not within the same skin—— But 'tis no part of an old soldier's to rake up tales! So Todescan he is, from Provence, and a Huguenot . . . let him have it so! Anyhow, he is a great man in Geneva now, provost-of-arms, trainer of the town companies, accepted citizen. . . . Aye, aye, those long-headed burghers, ever thinking of their ravening neighbours in the mountains of Savoy, have gauged the worth of such a man! Espingola was a good rogue, stuffed with fighting tricks as a brush is with bristles, and the simplest of them worth a Jew's eye. . . . Todescan sings psalms, hath no variety in his swearing, and holds an even prospect of not dying in his boots after all. But the youth of Geneva sucks knowledge out of him as a

weasel sucks an egg! Yet," added the speaker as he marked the changing visage of the Templar, "rest ye merry, masters. They are likely to cross the silver sea to contest it with your Saviolo's honours!"

Beckett rose suddenly.

"I cry you mercy, captain," he said, taking up his rapier from the wall and slinging it briskly back into its carriages, as if moved by a mighty haste. "Would we could invite you to a friendly bout on the scaffold. But, since it cannot be—Bellona has marked you too often for her own—why, then, give you good den, Signor Strongitharmo!"

The captain rose upon his stump, went through an elaborate congee; then stood, with good-humoured mien, watching the young man salute his comrades and stride out of the door in right dapper deportment. When the last inch of the smartly cocked rapier-scabbard, neatly draping a flap of the cloak, had disappeared round the corner, he himself called for his bilbo and cape. As he flung the patches of folds with noble gesture about his old shoulders, he found Dick Wyatt at his elbow.

"Ah, fare ye well, young sir," said he genially. "Shall ye take advice? Then, till your locks are blunched and rare, like these, never believe you have that skill, not only in your rapier-play but in any other military, which is not some day to be caught in a trap. . . . Now, I mind me, being in Genoa, the year of the great Barbary sailing, there was mighty talk of a new-fangled kind of firepot, and——"

"But, nay, good captain, let me entreat you yet to one moment more of rapier-talk. An it please you, I would fain attend you on your walk home."

And, as the clank of the lusty young spurred heel presently rang out past the open window of the tavern, punctuated by the thud of the voyager's wooden stump on the cobble-stones of Fleet Lane, the lingerers within the room could hear a boyish voice stammering outlandish names: Meyer . . . Thibault . . . Capoferro . . . Todescan—Todescan, of Geneva.

III

Now entertain conjecture of a time
 When creeping murmurs and the poring dark
 Fills the wide vessels of the Universe . . .
 From camp to camp through the soul womb of night
 The hum of either army stilly sounds,
 That the fixed sentinels almost receive
 The secret whispers of each other's watch.

SHAKESPEARE, *King Henry V.*

It was on the eleventh day of December, by English reckoning; on the twenty-second according to the new Gregorian calendar as used in foreign lands, that Dick Wyatt, at a turning of the road by the elbow of a hill, came in sight of the goal of his long journeying.

Reining in his nag, he gazed. Yonder was Geneva! It rose in the distance from the plain, severe within its bastioned walls, a few spires faintly gilt by the parting rays of the sun, that was fast sinking behind the further chain of low hills. There was something in the spring of the cathedral on its eminence, above the black, clustering roofs, which brought back to his mind, with a transient pang of yearning, the outline of Paul's on the Ludgate heights, away in far England. In the forefront the Rhone bounded and roared, foaming in its southward race. Beyond the

grim city spread the dark waters and the silent Lake Lemman. Beyond again, through the frosty air, against a darkening sky, towered the gold and rosy snows of Savoy.

The sight, impressive enough as the sudden view of a long-dreamed-of journey's end, was specially welcome at the end of a day's ride through bad weather and sorely rough ways. As the travellers gazed, with eyes of satisfaction, not unmixed with awe, a distant boom rolled through the still air

Many experiences had Dick Wyatt gone through since he left his peaceful island: among others, a disastrous one of closed town gates at fall of night. He spurred his tired mount, therefore; and it was with but a few minutes to spare that he reached the Porte de Cornevin, and found himself inside the staid stronghold of Calvinism. Before being granted free entrance, he was suspiciously questioned by a sergeant of the burgher-guard, on his character, religion, and the purpose of his journeying; an examination which he passed with some difficulty, though French was still unready to his tongue. So soon, however, as it transpired that his business was with one Maître Todescan, the sour visage of the sergeant relaxed; he was not only admitted, but speedily assured that any friend of worthy Master Todescan, Provost of the town companies, must be welcome in Geneva!

And so, all in the uncertain light of a winter orange afterglow, the last comer to the town found his way through the winding streets—past the old Castel of St. Gervais, by the Pont aux Mariniers, over the thundering Rhone as it rushes out of the lake, across the isle, towards the steep-rising Grand

Rue, wherein (so had said the burgher sergeant) dwelt the great Provost-at-arms, "at the sign of the Roy David, just a pistol-shot short of St. Germain Church."

Dick Wyatt, as men will who are haunted by a fixed purpose, paid little heed to aught but what fell in with the main tenor of his thoughts. He marvelled not at the prosperity of the noble Free-town, at the orderly, sober throng, the breath of peace that pervaded the place, unlike those airs of furtive merriment snatched between spells of disaster which marked the war-ridden towns he had recently passed through. He took no heed of the houses, wondrous tall, showing at almost every floor a glow of fire or lamp that met you like a smile of welcome. But rather he marvelled how a man of martial renown, such as the great Todescan, could find congenial dwelling among people where psalming and grave converse, rather than the ringing of spurs and the cocking of beavers, seemed the chief assertion of manliness.

And it made his heart leap, for all his weariness, as he halted at length before the Roy David, suddenly to hear, above the bustle of a hostelry at supper-time, the rousing clank of iron, the stamp of foot and the sharp cries which tell of the fencing hour. He raised his head and perceived that the sounds proceeded from a row of windows on the first floor, lighted redly and wide open in spite of the great cold.

"So! Todescan at last!"

With an eager presentiment of all that he—well-prepared scholar, if ever there was one—was soon to learn under those projecting gables, Dick Wyatt

entered the door of the inn.—Little did he dream fast his knowledge would grow that very night!

Mine host of the Roy David appraised the comer's appearance with one look of an experienced eye.

"Aye, faith! There is still accommodation, though my house is all but full. And you would have spoken with Master Todescan? And, faith, I thought much. Though what there is in our Todescan that you all should thus . . . and Englishmen t. . . But I, for one, have no call to grumble. . . . And may make bold to guess further, my gentleman, that you desire speech of Todescan even before supper? Eh? Said I truly?"

And without more ado the traveller was conducted up a winding stairway to the door of the fencing room.

It was a long, low, beam-ceiled gallery, covering the whole depth of the house from high street back lane; lit with four oil lamps; bare of furniture but for a couple of forms and an arm-rack in the corner. The last lesson of the day was over. A heavy-looking youth had just drawn on his doublet and was adjusting its points, ever and anon wiping his face and the back of his neck, spite of the icy blast pouring through the open windows.

"Maitre Todescan," cried mine host from the threshold, all professional cheeriness, "again I bring an English admirer—one, mark you, that cannot wait another hour before saluting you! What a man you are, aha! No doubt you would, as usual, partake of supper together? I leave you. But the time to toss that basket of trout into the pan, and to carbonade a rib of that veal—— Say I well? Aye; and a

pitcher of the white wine of Morges—eh? I know—I know!”

Without waiting for reply, he retired, leaving Dick Wyatt face to face with his great man.

The first impression was curiously unpleasant; and Dick was seized with an unexpected revulsion—a sense of resentment—as against something unnatural. He had grown accustomed to expect, oddly enough, a genial strain as inseparable from a great teacher of the murderous science. But here was a saturnine visage, with a vengeance! An unformed thought quickly took possession of the Englishman's mind: in practice with such a one, cunning strokes of fence would assume a new, gruesome complexion—would savour more of cruelty and treachery than of skill.

As a fact, Maitre Todescan's face displayed anything but cordiality at that instant. It was with the air of him who finds his time trespassed upon at a decidedly inopportune moment that he turned upon the visitor, looking deeply at him. Meanwhile, with an engaging glibness, cultivated on repeated occasions, the youth fell to explaining his presence. For a spell Todescan listened in silence; then suddenly seemed to make up his mind to more graciousness. A smile found its way to his lips, without, however, reaching the eyes, that remained filled as with some dark and absorbing speculation:

He was honoured. Yes; he would, on the morrow, offer his humble services to the gentleman. Now, however, he must go forth. He had charge to-night of the burgher-guards' watch. But to-morrow— He bowed. There came a furtive look into the close-set eyes. It was happy, was it not? for the stranger

that he had just saved the hour of the setting watch. The days were of the shortest. Had the traveller encountered any noticeable experience on his approach to Geneva? Which road had his been? From the Bern side? Ah, from the north! Tode stood musing for a moment. Well, he must crave the young master's leave until the morrow.

The man spoke with a conscious air, which betrayed the tardy grafting of courtly manners upon an original stock of camp brutality. And Dick Wyatt, escorted downstairs, politely but firmly shaken off at the kitchen door, as he watched the fencing-master work himself up scientifically in his great cloak and stride out into the night, had a fantastic impression as if he had just passed by an unknown personal danger. In some dudgeon, with a lingering regret for the merry taverns of Paul's Chains (oh, how far they seemed!), the Englishman consumed his trout and drank his thin wine by himself. And soon after, the melancholy drone of curfew having sounded from the neighbouring tower, he wended his way dejectedly to the bare and very cold room allotted to him just below the eaves.

But under the combined influence of bodily chill and over-fatigue, and mental annoyance, it seemed as though decidedly the soothing of sleep were not to be granted that night. After a few hours of angry tossing, the youth made up his mind to defy all curfew laws: he struck the flint, and once more lit the small length of tallow allotted to him.

Geneva at last! . . . Three months since he had started from England, but a few days after that tavern meeting which had fired his young blood; and throughout the burthen of his thoughts had been

Todescan . . . Todescan of Geneva! A long and tedious way it had been, with more than one unpleasant adventure. Laid by the heels at Cologne, through some pernicious fever; hindered, almost at every step, by his ignorance of tongues, of travel. . . . But the goal was reached—Geneva at last!

Wrapped in his travelling-cloak, he began to rehearse the tale of his fencing knowledge in preparation of the morrow's ordeal, when he should face, foiled rapier in hand, "the king of them all," as Captain Strongitharm had dubbed this Todescan.

After the manner of men enamoured, living in dreams of their lady; of poets haunted by rhymes and lilt and metaphors; of misers, with thoughts ever circling round their treasures (madmen all, in their degree), so this youth, on whom the meretricious new-fangle rapier had cast her spell, had grown mad, mad as any lover, rhymester, or harpagon; fencing-mad ever as the Martius portrayed by Marston—no uncommon occurrence about these years.

The few inches of candle supplied by the Roy David came abruptly to an end; the long, unsnuffed wick collapsed, drowned its flame with a sizzle, and left him once more in darkness. Dick Wyatt was in that state of nocturnal lucidity of mind in which it seems verily as if sleep would never be known again in life. He remained as he was, sitting up in bed, gazing at some particular bright star that, between two gables, peered into the blackness of his room. In time the star progressed out of sight, and he had nothing left but to hearken to the all-pervading silence—that singular silence of an enclosed town



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buried in slumber, on a night of frost when not even a prowling animal is about.

Into the great stillness the tower clock of a neighbouring church dropped the stroke of one. The grave note reverberated with an odd emphasis; the pulsing vibrations hung, lingering, upon the air, as if in warning. Strangely, the reminder of the hour appeared to break a spell. At first, to the musician-listener, it was only as if that sense of deathlike hush had departed. True, he could hear nothing yet he felt as if, in the world around, were sounds that could be heard. Presently he realised that there was indeed something astir under the silent scintillation of the stars. Filled with an unaccountable sense of surprise he sprang out of bed; and, standing tip-toe in the darkness, strained his ear to catch he knew not what. A moment later he had pushed open the casement and thrust his head into the cold night: a rumour without, eery, faint, intermittent, indefinable into the midst of it, suddenly springing, human sounds; a sharp cry, pain or rage; a call; and then a shot, harquebus or pistol; another! . . . Silence again. And now a clang that made the woodwork rattle. All was clear to his mind's eye as if he saw: a culverin on the rampart had spoken. It was fight! It was a dead-of-night assault on the sleeping town!

The news began to rush like water from open sluices through the main ways; drums, sharp and panting, ran north and west, chequering the night. One came drubbing up the High Street, and Dick bent out of his window to peer down. Nothing to be seen but a denser shadow in the dark, and a faint whiteness: the skin of the drum. But out of the

murk rose the cry, thrown out between the taps in strangled words by one out of all breath: "Armes, armes! A la Tertasse! La porte est prise! Armes! Au Savoyard!"

Right and left casements clattered back; heads were thrust forth with much exchange of exclamation. Half-dressed men, many in nought but shoes and shirts, came hastening out of their houses, halbert or matchlock in hand, feverishly concerting as they scurried towards the west ramparts, from whence the clamour upwelled. And presently, over all, the great bell of the cathedral threw the clang and drone of the tocsin—lamentable, making the windows, the very rafters, shiver as if with terror in the dark.

Some new treachery of the ever-treacherous Ligue party. . . . The ferocious mercenaries of the Duke of Savoy. . . . The sack of the town. . . . 'Twas a fearsome thing to contemplate—Les Savoyards! Awe-struck voices cried the tidings from window to window.

Dick Wyatt understood but one thing: there was fighting forward. And a new spirit awoke in him. He thrust his feet into his list shoes—no time to pull on long boots—buckled his sword over a still unfastened doublet, and groped his way down the black stairs into the street. Men moved like shadows. Here and there a lantern made a narrow circle of light. More shirts, vaguely white in the all but complete darkness, were to be met than doublets or cloaks; many a foot went bare to save that priceless minute of time at the rampart that might decide between success and massacre. With jaws firmly set on the thought of the coming death-struggle (aye, and

on the thought of children and women!), none found breath to spare for words. A sudden halt was called at the entrance, squat and thick-pillared, of some monstrous cavern, or so it seemed to Dick. Punged into the crisp air spread the smell of apples, onion straw. . . . Ah, the Market Hall! A man sprang into the midst of them, out of the black. His voice rang—a soldier's voice, accustomed to command:

"Back! To the Bastion de Rive, every man! Every man, I say! The attack at the Tertasse but a feint. The enemy is at the Rive Gate! That is where men are wanted! Back!"

He ran, flinging out his arms; and the whole procession turned before him as the flock before the sheep-dog. The light of a lantern fell upon a harsh, thin face upon gleaming, small eyes.—It was Todescan, the Provost!

Dick Wyatt's soul leaped to the splendid mastery of this soldier in the emergency. Here was the champion in his right place; here the leader for him here a gorgeous chance to take his first lesson from the terrible blade!

Upon the very spring of this elation fell a sudden chilling doubt. The last of the crowd had moved lustily up the narrow street once more, but Todescan had stopped short; and, with a stride to one side, and a swift glance right and left, he had dived down an alley. After a second's hesitation, moved by uneasy curiosity, Wyatt bounded forward in his wake, found the mouth of the entry, and noiselessly followed in pursuit.

The alley, narrow, winding, and all but closed from the skies by overhanging eaves, was pitch dark. But

the rapid, assured footsteps in front guided him, and he was able to thread his way. At a turn of the lane, a vague lifting of the gloom told of a more open space; and, against the lighter background, the black bulk of his man became perceptible. A vague but overpowering suspicion caused Dick Wyatt to remain concealed. Todescan had halted. His steel cap, catching the glint of starlight, revealed a furtive movement as of one peering and hearkening. Against the faintly luminous sky, a crenellated outline, cut high above, told the nature of the place—some inner patrol-way at the foot of the town walls. The night all around was now alive with rumour; but this open spot still held silence and emptiness. With a dart, like a serpent, Todescan suddenly stooped, and from under a pile of stones (as far as the listener could judge) dragged forth some heavy object.

IV

Thou art a traitor and a miscreant
 Too good to be so and too bad to live . . . !
 With a foul traitor's name I stuff thy throat . . .
 What my tongue speaks, my right drawn sword may prove.

SHAKESPEARE, *King Richard II.*

Wyatt watched, held by the horrid suspicion that gripped him ever more sickeningly. Todescan was fiercely busy. There came a thud, as though the unknown instrument of mischief, that was so heavy and clanked on the cobbles as it moved, were being thrust against a door. And now, out of the darkness, danced the red sparkle of flint and steel. A faint point sprang and remained aglow. Thereafter, more sparkle, and then a steady fizzle. Wyatt was no

soldier, but he knew of the quick-match. The little hissing fire-snake whispered of dire treachery; with its evil glimmer it lit lurid understanding in his brain. . . . An unguarded postern in the ramparts, a traitor behind it, a petard to blow the breach!

The young man's blood rose in fury. He drew his sword; his cry rang out incoherently:

"O base and murderous! Treachery! Hold; Rogue, traitor, renegade rogue! Help there! O sweet Jesu!"

The English words could be but mere sounds to the knave; but their clamour was eloquent. Todescan started, wheeled round; his blade leaped forth. The scintillation of the match cast the merest trembling gleam, yet he recognised the youth; and, cursing him blasphemously for an English fool, opposed his headlong attack with contemptuous yet vindictive mastery.

For a single moment, that yet seemed in its tension to pass the bounds of time, as Wyatt found himself under the glare—felt rather than seen—of those sinister eyes, that from the first had struck a chill to his soul, the full realisation of his own madness swept upon him. Here was he challenging to the death the world's greatest swordsman: all his own science served but to emphasise his sense of appalling helplessness. But even at the first meeting of blades the misgiving vanished. His spirit rose to exaltation, stimulated by the feeling of his opponent's superb mastery; stimulated, too, by the low chuckle that Todescan gave. The utter scorn of it! So might a demon laugh in the dark, exulting in the power of his own evil.

Upon a singular trick of the imagination, as in the

flash of a vision, the youth thought to be once more in the old fencing-room of Paul's Chains, in the 'Friars. There rose the great yellow windows looking Thamesward; there the panelled walls, the hacked pillars; and there, over the point of his own rapier, the kindly, keen face of his revered master; of Saviolo, the mirror of chivalrous courtesy. . . . Hark to his voice, admonitory yet encouraging:

"Eh la! point in line, figlio mio; ever in line! And ever lower than the wrist! Lower, lower, good lad! Thumb down, and up with the little finger, elbow out, nearly straight! So, stand thus, and I promise thee ne'er a blade in the world shall surprise thy ward!"

As it in obedience, Dick swiftly fell into the well-known expectant guard. Even as he did so, there was a jerk—it was almost like an exclamation of wonder and disappointment—in the steel that pressed on his own; and Dick Wyatt was back again, fighting for his life, the Genevan cobblestones under his feet, the glimmer of the quick-match and its steady hiss, frightful menace warning him to haste! He gripped the ground in his soft shoes (a blessing it was, thought he swiftly, he had not waited to don the great boots!); he set his teeth. Never, for smallest breathing-space, did the Provost's terrible long blade release his own. He felt it gliding, seeking to bind, fiercely caressing; felt the deadly spring behind a tiger's crouch; felt the invincible, unknown thrust ready against his first weakening. And that weakening was coming apace! It was all he could do to hold his opposition. As a kind of spell cast by the fingers of steel, by the superhuman flexibility of his

opponent's wrist, a palsy seemed to be creeping up his own outstretched arm. One twitch of relaxation, he knew, and he was sped!

Now, whether from the depth of his own need, or whether the spirit of the master were hovering over a beloved scholar in his dire extremity—who shall say?—certain it was that the very tones of Saviolo were now recalling to Wyatt's brain a favourite axiom of the fence school:

"Chi para, busca . . . chi tira, tocca! . . . He who parries but seeks . . . he who thrusts, reaches!"

It was to the youth as if a flame had been lit in his soul. Why wait in anguish to parry a coming secret thrust, when he could still himself strike? Up he sprang, brain and eye, wrist and nimble feet, in magnificent concert. To his dying day, Dick swore that, for the instant, he saw in the dark, even to the dreadful grin on the face opposite to him. His ear, strained to the same marvel of keenness, caught the sound of a catching breath—not his own. Exultant, he thrust; out went Saviolo's favourite *botta lunga sopramano* with point reverse!

It was on the very dart of Todescan's stroke, which was even then leaping out like a bolt from ambush. Todescan's own pass—the fierce, jerky binding, the incredible turn of the wrist inwards, the infallible *estocade* that was to have driven the point irredeemably under the armpit, and let free the overweening soul that dared oppose him in earnest, Todescan's own great thrust— Yes, but one splinter of a second too late! There was a sinister grating of steel upon steel, and the edge of the menacing blade glided, harmless, by Wyatt's side. But the Englishman's rapier, driven straight, heart-high, went home.

Todescan, caught on the start of his own lunge, actually ran upon the point.

At any other moment, the horrible case with which his steel traversed living flesh would have sickened Dick Wyatt. But there was nothing now but fierce, leaping triumph in his blood—the great gaunt figure had stopped dead short! A broken curse, a groan ending in a long sigh: and the Provost of Geneva fell at the feet of the bewildered London apprentice, whose bright blade was now black to within a foot of the hilt.

“Master Vincent Saviolo—have thanks!” cried the youth in his soul, and waved the victorious weapon at the stars. Even as he did so, a drop falling from it glittered, a dreadful red, in the light of the quick-match. “My God!” he called out, upon a new thought; flung the good sword from him, and was down on his knees, tearing like one possessed at the last inch of the burning rope.

The urgency of the peril—for he had no mind to see the fruits of his great combat thrown away—lent a desperate sureness to his effort. In another instant he had sprung up again, and was stamping the last spark under foot. Then he stood and breathed deeply, feeling dazed, almost as in a dream.

Hemmed in by the rumours, this little square under the bastion was still wrapped in stillness—a stillness that suddenly grew awful to Dick as he thought of the dead body. It was the first time he had sped a soul: in the cant of rufflers, this was “his first man.” Yonder black heap: that was he who had been Todescan—a name Dick had never spoken but with bated breath.

The sight of torches bobbing at some far depth of the wall-lane, the sound of running steps and voices uplifted, startled him from his mood. With a sudden vividness he saw his own peril. To be found alone with the corpse of the honoured Provost, near the tell-tale petard and the remains of the quick-match—he, a stranger just arrived in the city, without a single friend, without even speech to explain or defend himself—his doom as a spy, traitor and murderer would be trebly sealed. He hastily picked up his rapier and made a wild-cat spring up the steps that led to the battlements, reaching the black shelter of the platform only just in time to escape notice.

There, although prudence urged a noiseless flight along the walls to some farther quarter of the town where he might mix with the throng, he was fain to sit down and gather strength; for shaking knees and labouring heart refused service. He dropped on the sill of an empty gun-embrasure, and hearkened. The steps and voices were drawing near the dark spot where the body lay. Outwards, beyond the moat, stretched the fields under the starlight. Frogs were croaking with strange persistence for the time of year. All at once the lane below him was filled with new sounds, exclamations, hurried steps, a clang as of a falling pike. Impelled by a desperate curiosity, he crept back to the edge of the platform, and looked down.

Luridly illumined by the glare of torches, he could see, clustered together, a party of dishevelled, anxious-faced burghers—a score or so of them—armed with harquebus or halbert. One rushed, cursing, from the petard at the postern to the body of Todescan. Another was shaking his fist as to

some unseen enemy. Dick was preparing to crawl away to some safer hiding-place, when it was borne in upon him, to his utter astonishment, that the unknown slayer of the Town Provost was already vindicated. Little French had he, true; but his wits were sharpened by danger and deed, and by his knowledge of the truth in this matter. One, who seemed to be the leader of the party, was speaking, emphasising his words by vindictive thumps of his clenched hand on his palm:

"He sent us to the Bastion de Rive. . . . There was no enemy there! That was his treachery! Todescan has betrayed us, but God has avenged!"

And deep-mouthed came the words: "Todescan, the traitor!"

Dick Wyatt straightened himself with a long sigh of relief. Yet he deemed it still best play to withdraw unseen from the neighbourhood of these hard-pressed, excited men. Stealthily he wiped his blade; and, in disgust, flung the bloody kerchief over the wall into the ditch.

Instantly he was struck by the singular cessation of the obtrusive frog-croaking. He paused a moment, wondering. Then, as though the throwing of a kerchief had been an expected signal from the darkness without, a muffled call came up the wall:

"Eh—sei tu, alla fin fine, Espingola! . . . E pronto?"

At once one of these words evoked the memory of old Strongitharm: "A corporal in Piedmont they called Espingola . . ." had said the veteran. Dick thrust his head through the embrasure and peered into the moat. Yonder, in sooth, huddled at the foot of the rampart—in their black armour, darker

shadows upon the gloom—lay a party of the Savoyards.

Boyish Dick forgot his wise resolution; all thoughts of safety, of self-preservation evaporated. He sheathed his rapier and rushed back boldly to the platform's edge.

"Ho, there, my men!" he shouted in sturdy English; "the enemy is yonder!"

All torches were lifted, all heads looked up in astonishment. He pointed and waved vehemently, and summoned a scrap of their language to his tongue:

"L'ennemi! l'ennemi, là! . . . là!"

Rapidly the burghers ran up and lined the parapet. Those outside who had expected a secret ally to beckon from the breach were confronted by defenders. Stealth and silence were of no further avail—the Savoyards upsprang. The harquebusade began.

V

Acts of black night, abominable deeds,
Complots of mischiefs, treasons, villainies
Ruthful to hear. . . .

Titus Andronicus.

The story of the Escalade of Geneva was soon to become matter of history. Widespread in all Protestant countries was to be the bitter tale of that night-surprise of the Free City, treacherously planned in the midst of proclaimed peace. And all who heard of it knew how nigh the vile plan came to fruition; how narrow, for one panting hour, remained the margin between victorious repulse and annihilation; what nameless orgies of blood, lust, and rapine were, by

the Duke's explicit orders, to follow on the shout of "Ville prise! Ville gagnée!"

Once, indeed, that cry of terror was actually raised, to strike ice-cold to many an innocent heart. And no doubt it would have been justified, had all the concerted measures of assailants without and of confederates within come to their expected issue: among which the most pregnant was the blowing up of the little, forgotten postern under the Bastion de l'Oye!

But as yet Dick Wyatt knew nought of all this. By the light of one of those street fires that had been kindled, wherever possible, until the opening of the blessed eye of day, he was sullenly attending to sundry slight wounds that now had begun to stiffen and smart. A morose depression gathered upon him.

A hand was clapped on his shoulder:

"Why, Dick Wyatt—and hast also come to Geneva!"

He had not heard the beloved tongue from a true English mouth, these weary months. His heart leaped. He sprang up. Oh, marvel. . . . No less a man than Master Beckett! Master Beckett, torn in attire and powder-stained; mocking, yet with a tender gleam in the eye. Their hands met.

"I have looked for thee, Dick, among the dead, the maimed and the sound, and here art thou at last!"

"How now—yet you knew me not here?"

"Nay, an hour ago I never dreamt of Dick Wyatt. But down yonder, at the Tertasse gate, where the Spaniard and the Italian were made at last to choose between jump the wall again and take our steel, there was one burgher—a tall one, by the Mass, but yet

he owed something to the timely help of my rapier—
'Gran mercy!' saith he, 'you English are rude
escrimeurs' (thus they call a fencer, Dick); 'we left
one on the Bastion de l'Oy. He hath little French,
but he drummed right heartily on the black harness
of the Savoyard.' 'An Englishman?' say I; and,
there being no more work to do, I looked for him
who had little French, lest he want succour or
friendly word. But never thinking of thee! What
make you from Lombard Street, Dick Wyatt?"

"Aye; and what make you in Geneva from the
Temple, Master Beckett?"

The retort was made smiling. Gone was melan-
choly; gone, too, was the rivalry that had burned
sore in each heart against the other. They stood,
eye in the eye. Presently they both laughed: the
same thought was in their minds.

"So! in truth they did speak of another English-
man," said Dick.

"They spoke, sayst thou? Who spoke?"

"In Todescan's fence-room," said Wyatt gravely.

Master Beckett mused a moment. "When came
you to Geneva, friend Dick?" he asked.

"Yesterday, at nightfall."

A great astonishment writ itself upon the Templar's
countenance.

Last night! Plague on thee, Dick!" he went on
banteringly as he marked the other's enigmatic smile,
"but thou wast in monstrous haste! Well—come.
'Tis fair time to go crack a quart for a morning
draught; or so at least 'twould be in London. Todes-
can?" he chuckled. "I have news for thee, Dick.
But come."

Arm in arm they made their way to the nearest

tavern; and there, seated at a retired table, with a stoup of warm wine and a white loaf between them, resumed converse.

On his peregrination, in pursuance of the strenuous scheme of sword-education suggested by Captain Strongitharm three months ago (and how far it now seemed!), the Templar had made many stages. The first had been at Antwerp, where the Sieur Gerard Thibault directed a Spanish Academy of the highest philosophic flight.

The next had been Cologne: city chiefly notable, in his memory's eye, not for a minster and the bones of eleven thousand virgins, but for a certain low-ceiled, stone-floored fighting room, at the back of the Rheinthorgasse, conducted by one Heinrich-of-the-Great-Feet—a den which rang lustily to the clang of long sword and short and to raucous jovial voices, from the earliest break of fast to the last evening can.

Another had been in the Strasburg timberhouse of Joachim, giant of the blade, whose method of sword converse was essentially rhythmic and required for its perfect mastery the lilt of fife and tabor.

A fourth was spent at Mainz, where Eisenkopf—once Capoferro of Bologna—had transplanted the latest fruits of the southern foyning arts. And the last at Lyons: there the veteran Petit Jean, exile from Paris, reigned in provincial prosperity and still retained about his name the glamour of one who had imparted fabulous fencing skill and judgment to the late Henri de Valois.

From each of these men he had purchased the

secret of one or more indefeasible passes (else logic was a fool); of one or more universal parries or counter-checks which none could circumvent (save, of course, by unholy compact with the Fiend). And all this at the expense of much vigour and toil, and eke much good English gold. For, if invaluable tuition of this kind was expensive already to the native, lessons to a foreigner, given perforce in strenuous dumb show and with great waste of expletives, commanded fairly enough, in faith, at least a double price. But Beckett regretted none of it.—It had been rich food to his folly.

During the long rides from town to town he would rehearse in his mind the tale of his gains—even as a merchant counting up the safe delivery of his argosies:—

“The pass of *el dagatin*, from Thibault—Ah, Dick Wyatt, sweet lad, how wilt thou stare when thy long punta sopramano (in which, faith, thou dost excel) finds vacancy . . . the open door . . . thin air . . . and then: one-two and the back edge of my rapier next on the nape of thy neck! Rare! 'Twill exactly suit thy long punta. By my hilts, I'll retain it for thee.

“. . . And 'twill be feast to see the lad face the *Ochsenstiern* and *Linkseisenport* of Maistre Joachim, yet never divine the hook till the bait is gulped. . . .

“. . . Ha! the *punta d'Alicorno*—no more to be parried than a bolt from the crossbow! . . . Yes, that was full worth the ringing pieces that went from mine into the pouch of that brisk knave of Mainz. . . .

“. . . But, a plague on't, that the most conclusive of all—*la botte de Nevers*, Petit Jean's most precious secret thrust and the dearest to purchase, only to be

imparted on oath of secrecy lest it should be used against its father—should be of no avail in courteous bout!”

Never a night had passed since the wandering scholar's departure from Lyons, that, in the solitude of his inn chamber, this deadly *botte de Nevers*—the nimble return of point between the brows, sudden death-bolt from the blue—had not been practised for an hour against a chalk mark on the panel. A foyne, already legendary among swordsmen, one which none who had ever faced the ferocious Nevers ever lived to learn for themselves: Beckett had it in his hands, in full mastery . . . and yet it could not be tried in courtesy, for it forgave not! It was a foyne to dream of—but not to use against friend Wyatt. . . . No, a plague on it! . . . In this land of aliens, he thought on his rival countryman with almost a touch of tenderness.

And thus Beckett, musing along foreign roads upon that contest which was to take place next year on the 'Friars scaffold, under her Grace's own eyes, would fall (with Heaven knows what freaks of pronunciation over the fantastic jargon) to the tale of his other purchases in the fencing market, all of which, not being wipes or pokes at the face, could and should be served up as nuts for Master Dick Wyatt's skill to crack: Item, *Ochsenstiern*; item, *Botta di Pigliafilo* . . . item, *Volta di Cinghiara*; item, *Estramasson de Manchette*; item, the *Passepied de Demi volte*; item—No, that was the last! Do what he would he could not remember the sequence of steps and pauses and feints which made (according to Capoferro) of the divine *imbrochintrecciata*

becca the most absolutely-not-to-be-parried thrust at a man's doublet!

"'Twas venturesome of thee, Dick, to come seek knowledge so far," quoth Beckett.

"You came as far, methinks," was the good-humoured retort. Dick Wyatt had never felt himself a match for his rival in words. But at this game of friendly mockery he knew that he held to-day the highest card in reserve.

"Aye, so," said the Templar lightly. "But with me the enterprise was less. I have a gift of tongues—and friends in the university. 'Twas easy. But since start you did, twas a fault not to have started sooner—I do assure you," he added with meaning. "I left on this quest it comes nigh three months since."

And then, with gusto, did he relate the story of his long pilgrimage of fence. Marvellous to Dick's hearing were the names falling sonorously from his tongue; every master mentioned by Captain Strongitharm, and some others to boot. But it was anent his stay in this very city that he waxed most eloquent. Todescan, traitor or no, had proved, beyond compare, the arch-master, the demigod of the blade!

"Aye, Dick, 'twas pity thou came not sooner! Canst scarce, now, learn the thunder of Todescan," Master Beckett waxed enthusiastic, "this invisible, sudden death that laughs at plate or gorget! Canst, indeed, never learn it—save, of course, from me, when the time is ripe."

"Save from you, Master Beckett?"

"Yes, Diccon, save from me. The secret died to-night: Todescan was killed on the walls!"

Master Beckett, not unnaturally, attributed to disappointment the silence in which his rival received the news.

Dick Wyatt was reflectively rubbing his chin. For one brief instant he had burned to cap, by an obvious, crushing retort, his friend's ill-concealed exultation. But he now resolutely folded his lips upon his secret, telling himself that, in Beckett's own phrase, the time was not yet ripe. Since they were yet to meet in friendly contest of skill, he would reserve the story of the momentous duel until the moment of victory. For, of a surety, on the day of trial he would meet again this "thunderbolt" of Todescan; and how could he doubt now that he must prove victorious on the lesser as on the greater issue?

Assuming all the air of one who feels he has been checkmated, he changed the drift of the talk.

VI

O! he is the courageous captain of compliments. He fights as you sing pricksong, keeps time, distance, and proportion; rests me his minim rest, one, two, and the third in your bosom—a gentleman of the very first house. . . .—SHAKESPEARE, *Romeo and Juliet*.

Some three months later, on the very morning of their return to London, Dick and Master Beckett together sought the Bolt-in-Tun for their nooning-cup. They passed through its portals—this time, with never one of your elaborate tricks of courtesy as to precedence, but the taller with his arm on the other's shoulder—and they found the old place humming, even as on the day when last they had seen it,

with the talk of a death. But it was a death of far other importance even than that of Master Vincent. England's great Queen had passed away: ill filled was her place by a little ungainly Scot.

The comrades were greeted with a shout. 'Twas six months since they had been seen in Ludgate. Queries assailed them on every side; but by tacit agreement they kept their own counsel. True gentlemen, whose prowess was so soon to be tested in loyal public contest, they had no mind for boasting of knowledge lately acquired, after the fashion of your tavern-haunting gull. But at length so much leaked out: they had been preparing, each after his own fancy, for the great day of my Lord of Pembroke's prize-playing in honour of Saviolo's memory.

It was Beckett who dropped the information—a trifle loftily, perhaps, from the height of his travelled experience. He thought to impress his stay-at-home friends. The announcement was met, first, by silence, in which eyebrows were raised and glances exchanged; then out broke a hubbub—banter, mockery, condolence.—Poor lads! These long six months preparing! And here was one who knew, from knowledge certain, that public prize-playing would never more be seen in merry England!

The one who knew (from Whitehall, he) spake: His new Majesty loathed swordsmen's shows, and forbade them. The King could not look on a blade without shudder. Nay, if he had to knight a man, he must needs avert his eyes so doing. . . .

Dick and the Templar stared at each other. Were the friendly rivals glad or sorry? They scarce knew. Dick took a deep breath.

And now, from the head of the table—his place by rights it seemed to have become—up spoke Captain Strongitharm. From the moment he had recognised the young men, he had remained watching and listening in unwonted silence. His single eye was more commanding than ever. He tapped the table with his two fingers, and there fell a stillness in the room. He spoke of rulers and of her who was gone; of Mary of Scotland, and of sundry instances he had known, at home and abroad, of men (like the new King James, her son) frightened for life before their birth by a woman's terror. Then, from Jamie's horror of a drawn blade, came he to talk of fight and prize-playing and the like, thence to his darling theme: the great masters of the sword, alive or dead.

"Aye, young masters, you may have had your snippets of travel; but had ye known the tall men, the great days! . . . There was Cavalcabo, mark you, the mighty Italian; but he is dust. Now, the nearest to him in subtility was Eisenkopf (of Mainz, in the Palatinate). He, for all his High Dutch name, was from the south also. Capoferro was he. Now, this Eisenkopf had a certain thrust he called 'Pigliafilo.'"

"I know the trick," said Master Beckett over his can.

Captain Strongitharm raised an eyebrow.

"Yet to my mind," he went on unheedingly, "ne'er so great a man at the rapier—that is, for the single duello—as Petit-Jean, in Paris. He it was devised the 'Botte de Nevers.'"

"Aye," from Beckett again. "Petty John taught it well. But he teaches at Lyons now."

The captain's eye rolled a little redly upon the

fair, cool youth. It was scarce wholesome for one of so few years to know so much, to be so sure of speech. The boy must be set down.

"Ha! but only when a man has measured blades with Thibault of Antwerp—Thibault, the heritor of Carranza's own science, all by mathematical logic, squares, and tangents to the circumference"—he kept his eye severely upon the Templar, as the young man showed signs of opening his mouth again—"or eke with Meister Joachim of Strassburg-on-the-Rhine. . . . I mind me of a plaguy round-cut he would engineer on your extended arm, that he had christened 'Estramasson de Manchette.' It would do for you, by neat rapier-slicing, what the Spanish dog's halbert did for this hand, at the palisado of Pamplona."

"Saving your experience, good captain," interrupted Beckett demurely, "you mistake: 'Estramasson' is the Sieur Thibault's own device, by rule geometrical. I have practised both with him and with Master Joachim."

The veteran's gathering testiness exploded. He rapped out a parcel of rare outlandish oaths, and spluttered the name of Todescan: Todescan, to his mind the very angel—the very devil—of the sword. Who had not faced Todescan of Geneva knew nought of finality in fencing. Todescan's noted thrust——

And here, at last, was Master Beckett's moment to insert (with pardonable pride) the story of his acquired gains in far Geneva. He parted his lips to speak, his brown eyes sparkling, his frank smile flashing.

But, subtly, in a delicate, insinuating voice that dropped into the brief moment of silence allowed by Captain Strongitharm's pause for breath, Dick Wyatt forestalled him:

"Todescan, aye . . . of Geneva. And his noted thrust, at the armpit, on a binding of the blade, thus." He made a spiral movement with his extended wrist, and glanced for one instant slyly at Beckett's amazed face. "I met that thrust . . . aye, Captain Strongitharm, and with Master Vincent's own *punta riversa*."

There was a murmur of amazement. But something portentous, something at once secret and triumphant, about the speaker, held his audience—even the captain of many tales—hanging upon the coming phrase. It came simply:

"Todescan and I were alone together one night under the stars . . . a memorable night for Geneva——"

Beckett sprang to his feet and bent eagerly across the table. For a second Wyatt met his glance; then he dropped his own modestly, and in that gentle voice of his said:

"'Twas then I killed him."

POMONA



VI

POMONA

THE orchard was on a hill, the farmhouse lay at the foot. There was a long field, in spring a palace of cowslips, between the orchard and the house.

This September dawn Pomona came through it and left a dark track of green along the dew be-pearled grass. Little swathes of mist hung over the cowslip field, but up in the orchard the air was already clear. It was sweet with the scent of the ripe fruit, with the tart, clean autumn pungency left by the light frost.

Pomona shifted the empty basket that she had borne on her head to the ground and began to fill it with rosy-cheeked apples. Some she shook from the laden boughs, some she picked up from the sward where they had fallen from the tree; but she chose only the best and ripest.

A shaft of sunlight broke over the purple hills. It shone on her ruddy hair and on her smooth cheek. She straightened herself to look out across the valley at the eastern sky: all sights of Nature were beautiful to her and gave her a joy that, yet, she had never learnt to put into words, hardly into thoughts. Now as she stood gazing, some one sauntered along the road that skirted the orchard, and catching sight of her,

halted and became lost in contemplation of her, even as she of the sunrise pageant.

As evidently as Pomona in her homespun skirt and bodice belonged to the farmhouse, so did he to the Castle near by. The gentleman had made as elaborate a toilet for his early walk as if he had been bound for St. James's. His riding-coat was of delicate hue, and laces fluttered at his wrists and throat. His black lovelocks hung carefully combed on either shoulder from under his beplumed hat. A rapier swung at his side and, as he stood, he flicked at it with the glove in his bare hand. He had a long, pale face and long eyes with drooping lids and haughty eyebrows; a small, upturned moustache gave a tilt of mockery to grave lips. He looked very young, and yet so sedate and self-possessed and scornful that he might have known the emptiness of the world a hundred years.

Pomona turned with a start, feeling herself watched. She gazed for a moment in surprise, and a deep blush rose in her cheeks; then, still staring, she made a slow country curtsy. Off went the befeathered hat; the gentleman returned her salutation by a profound bow. Then he leaped the little ditch into the orchard and threaded his way through the trees towards her. She watched him come; her great eyes were like the eyes of a deer, as shy, as innocent.

"Good morrow, sir," said she, with another curtsy, and then corrected herself quickly, "good morrow, my lord." For, if he came from the Castle, he was surely a lord.

"Good morrow, madam," returned he pleasantly. His glance appraised her with open admiration.

What a glorious creature! What amber and

red on those smooth cheeks ; what ruddy radiance in that sun-illumined hair ! What a column of a throat, and how white the skin where the coarse kerchief was parted above the laced bodice ! What lines of bust and hip, of arm and wrist ; generous but perfect ! A goddess ! He glanced at the strong, sunburnt hands ; they were ringless. Unowned then, as yet, this superb nymph.

His long eyes moved at their pleasure ; and she stood waiting in repose, though the colour came and went richly on her rich cheek. Then he bowed again, the hat clasped to his bosom.

"Thank you," said he, and replaced his beaver with a turn of the wrist that set all the grey and white plumes rippling round the crown.

"Sir?" she queried, startled, and on her second thought, "my lord?"

At this he broke into a smile. When he smiled, his haughty face gained a rare sweetness.

"Thank you for rising thus early and coming into the orchard and standing in the sunrays and being, my maid, so beautiful. I little thought to find so fair a vision. 'Twill be a sweet one to carry forth with me . . . if it be the last on earth."

Her wits were never quick to work. She went her country way as a rule as straight and sweetly and unthinkingly as the lilies grow. To question why a noble visitor at the Castle—and a visitor it must be since his countenance was unfamiliar—should walk forth at the dawn and speak as if this morning saunter were to death, never entered her head.

She stammered. "Oh, sir!" to his compliment, and paused, her lip quivering over the inarticulate sense of her own awkwardness.

"Have you been gathering apples?" quoth he, still smiling on her.

"Aye, sir," she said, "to make preserve withal"; and faltered yet again, "my lord!"

"Aye," approved he. "It has a fair sound in your mouth. Would I were your lord! What is your name?"

She told him: "Pomona." Whereat he laughed and repeated it, as if he liked the sound. Then he looked at the east, and behold! the sun had risen, a full ball of crimson in a swimming sea of rose. The light glimmered upon his pale cheek and on the fine laces of his shirt, redly as if with stains of new blood.

"I must hence," he said, and his voice had a stern, far-away sound. "Farewell, Pomona! Wilt thou not wish me well?"

"My lord?"

"Wilt thou not?"

"Oh, indeed, my lord, I do." And she was moved on a sudden, she knew not why, and the tears gathered like a mist in her eyes. "With all my heart," she said.

He made her a final bow, bending till his curls fell over his face.

"I thank you."

She watched him walk away from her, in and out the apple trees, with his careless stride; then leap the little ditch again; and so on down the road.

And when he was lost to her sight, she still stood looking at the point where the way dipped and vanished and she had seen the last flutter of the grey feathers.

After a while she drew a long sigh and passed her

hands over her eyes, as if she were awakening from a dream. Then she began mechanically to fill her basket once more. All the ruddiness faded from the sky. The sun swam up into the blue, and a white brilliance laid hold of the dewy valley. Delicate gossamer threads floated high above the apple trees, against a vault of ever deeper blue. Somewhere from the hidden folds of the land a church bell began to chime. Then all at once Pomona dropped her basket and, while the apples rolled, yellow, green, and red, on every side, she set off running in the direction the gentleman had taken.

Why she ran, she knew not, but something drove her with a mighty urgency. Her heart beat thickly, and her breath came short, though as a rule there was no maid in the countryside that could run as she. When she came to the foot of the hill, she paused, and there, by the bramble brake where the firwood began, she saw, lying on the lip of the baby stream, a gauntleted grey glove. She turned into the wood.

The pine needles were soft under her feet. The pine stems grew like the pillars of a church aisle and the air was sweeter with their fragrance than any incense that was ever burned.

And after but a little way, where the forest aisle widened into a glade, she came on the grand riding-coat tossed in a heap; across it was flung an empty scabbard. And beyond, outstretched at the foot of a tree——! Pomona stopped short. Now she knew why she had had to run so fast!

He lay as if asleep, his head pillowed upon a branching root; but it was no slumber that held him. His features, whiter than ivory, were strangely

sharpened and aged, blue shadows were about nostrils and mouth; the parted lips under the mocking moustache were set in a terrible gravity; they were purple, like dead red roses. Between the long, half-open lids the eyeballs shone silver. It was not now God's lovely sunrise that stained the white cambric of his shirt. From where it had escaped from his relaxed hand, a long, keen-bladed sword gleamed among the pine needles.

Pomona knelt down. She parted the ruffled shirt with a steady hand; his heart still beat; but below it was a wound that might well cause death. She sat back on her heels and thought. She could not leave him to call for help, for he might die alone; neither could she sit useless beside him and watch him go. She took her resolution quickly. She rose, then bending, she braced herself and gathered the man into her arms as if he had been a child. He was no taller than she, and slight and lean of build. She was used to burdens; but she had not thought to find him so heavy. She staggered and shifted him for an easier grip; and then, as his pallid head lay loose and languid against her shoulder, the half-open eyelids fluttered, the upturned eyes rolled and fixed themselves. He looked at her; dark, dark as eternity was his gaze. She bent her head—his lips were moving.

"Pomona!"

It was the merest breath: but she knew it was her name as surely as if it had been shouted to her. Nearer she bent to him; a flicker as of a smile came upon those purple-tinted lips.

"Kiss me, Pomona!"

She kissed him and thought she drew from his

cold mouth the last sigh. But now she was strong. She could have gone to the end of the earth with this burden in her arms.

His black hair, dank and all uncurled, fell over her bare arm. With the movement his wound opened afresh; and as she pressed him against her she felt his blood soak through her bodice to the skin. Then her soul yearned over him with an indescribable, inarticulate passion of desire—to help him, to heal him! If she could have given her own blood to save him, she would have given it with the joy with which a mother gives life to the babe at her breast.

Pomona was mistress of herself and of her farm, and lived alone with her servants. Though she was a firm ruler, these latter considered her soft on certain points. They had known her, before this, carry home a calf that had staked itself, a mongrel cur half drowned. But a murdered gentleman—that was beyond everything!

“Heavens ha’ mercy, mistress!” cried Sue, rising to the occasion, while the others gaped and clapped their hands and whispered together. “Shall I fetch old Mall to help you lay him out?”

“Fool!” panted Pomona. “Bring me the Nantes brandy.”

* * * * *

Earl Blantyre awoke from a succession of dreams, in which he had had most varied and curious experiences; known strange horrors and strange sweetnesses; flown to more aërial heights than any bird, and sunk to deeper depth than the sea could hold; fought unending combats; lain at peace in tender arms.

He awoke. His eyelids were heavy. His hand had grown so weighty that it was as much as he could do

to lift it. And yet, as he held it up, he hardly knew it for his own; 'twas a skeleton thing. There was a sound in his ears which, dimly he recognised, had woven into most of his dreams these days, a whirring, soothing sound like the ceaseless beating of moth's wings. As he breathed deeply and with delicious ease, there was a fragrance of herbs in his nostrils. A tag of poetry floated into his mind—

I know a bank whereon the wild thyme blows.

He turned his head and went to sleep again, and dreamt not at all.

Pomona lighted the lamp and, shading it with her hand, came with soft tread into the guest-chamber. He was still asleep. She set down the light, mended the fire with another log, peeped into the pan of broth simmering on the hob, and then sat to her spinning-wheel once more. Suddenly the wool snapped; she started to find that he was holding back the curtain with a finger and thumb and had turned his head on the pillow to watch her; his eyes gleamed in the firelight. She rose and came to him quickly.

"So you were spinning," he said. His voice was very weak, but how different from those tones of dreadful clearness, of hoarse muttering with which she had been so sadly familiar!

Pomona knelt beside him and put her hand on his forehead, then on his wrist.

"Thank God!" she said.

"By all means," he answered, peering at her amusedly. "Nathless, why?"

"Nay, you must not speak," she bade him, and rose to pour the soup into a bowl.

He watched her while she stirred and tasted and added salt. He was smiling. When she lifted him, pillows and all, propped against her strong arm, and held the bowl to his lips at a compelling angle, he laughed outright. It was a rather feeble thing in the way of laughs, but to Pomona it was as wonderful and beautiful an achievement as a child's first word in the mother's ear.

"Drink," she said firmly, while her heart throbbed in joy.

"Now you must sleep," she added, as she settled him with extraordinary art. But sleep was far away from those curious wandering eyes.

"Bring the light closer and come to the bed again."

His voice had gained strength from Pomona's fine broth, and it rang in command. Without another word she obeyed him. As she sat down on the little oaken stool where he could see her, the light fell on her face; and, from behind her, the fire shone ruddily in her crown of hair.

"I remember you now," said he, lifting himself on his elbow. "You stood in the sunrise gathering apples for preserve; you are the nymph of the orchard."

He fell back with a sigh of satisfaction. "And your name is Pomona," said he.

The girl, her capable work-marked hands lying folded on her knee, sat in absolute stillness; but her heart was beating stormily under the folds of her kerchief.

The sick man's beard had grown, close and fine, round chin and cheeks during these long dreams of his. His hair lay in a mass on one shoulder; it had

been carefully tied back with a riband; and in all that black setting the pallor of his countenance seemed deathlike. Yet she knew that he was saved. He lay awhile, gazing at the beflowered ceiling of the great four-post bed; and by and by his voice came sighing:

"And after that what hap befell me? Help me to remember."

"I found you in the wood," said she slowly. "You were lying wounded."

He interrupted her with a sharp cry.

"Enough! I mind me now. Was I alone?"

"Quite alone, my lord."

"And my sword?"

There was a current of evil eagerness running through the feeble voice.

"Your sword, my lord?"

"Pshaw! was it clean, child? Bore it no sign upon the blade?"

"There was blood on it," said Pomona gravely, "to a third of the length."

The duellist gave a sigh.

"That is well," said he, and fell once more into silence, striving to knit present and past in his mind.

After a spell he shifted himself on his pillows so that he again looked on her.

Then his eyes wandered round the dark panelling, on the polished surface of which the firelight gleamed like rosy flowers. He touched the coarse sheet, the patchwork quilt, then lifted the sleeve of the homespun shirt that covered his thin arm, and gazed inquiringly from it to the quiet woman.

"How do I come here? Where am I?" queried he imperiously.

"I brought you; you are in my house," she answered him.

"You brought me?"

"Aye, my lord."

"You found me wounded," he puzzled, drawing his haughty brows together, "and you brought me here to your house? How?"

"I carried you," said Pomona.

"You carried me!"

The statement was so amazing, and Lord Blantyre's wits were still so weakened, that he turned giddy and was fain to close his eyes and allow the old vagueness to cradle him again for a few minutes.

Pomona prayed that he might be sleeping; but, as she was stealthily rising from his bedside, he opened his eyes and held her with them.

"You carried me, you brought me to your own house? Why?"

"I wanted to nurse you," said poor Pomona.

She knew no artifice whereby she could answer, yet conceal the truth. But it was as if her heart were being torn from her bit by bit.

His eyes, hard and curious, softened; so did the imperious voice.

"How did you keep them out?"

"Keep them out?"

She was beautiful, but she was dull.

"My kinsfolk, from the Castle."

Pomona stood like a child caught in grave fault.

"They do not know," she answered at last.

It was his turn to ejaculate in amazement: "Not know!"

"I did not want them," said she then doggedly.

"I did not want any fine ladies about, nor physicians

with their lancets. When my father was cut with the scythe, they sent a leech from the Castle, who blooded him: and he died. I did not want you to die."

She spoke the last words almost in a whisper, then she waited breathlessly. There came a low sound from the pillows. His laugh, that had been music to her a minute ago, now stabbed her to the heart. She turned, the blood flashing into her cheeks; yet his face grew quickly grave; he spoke, his voice was kind.

"Stay. I want to understand. You carried me, all by yourself, from the wood; is it so?"

"Aye."

"And no one knows where I am, or that you found me?"

"No. I went down to the wood again and brought back your coat and your sword and scabbard and your glove. I forbade my people to speak. None of the great folk know that you are here."

"And you nursed me?"

"Aye."

"Was I long ill?"

"Fourteen days."

"I have been near death, have I not?"

"You have indeed!"

"And you nursed me?" he repeated again. "How did you learn such science?"

"My lord, I have loved and cared for the dumb things all my life. There was the calf that was staked——" She stopped; that laugh was torture.

"Go on, Pomona!"

"I bathed your wound in cold water over and over till the bleeding stopped; and then, when the

fever came, I knew what brew of herbs would help you. One night I thought that you would die——”

“Go on, Pomona.”

“You could not breathe, no matter how high I laid you on the pillows——”

“Aye! Why dost halt again? What didst thou then?”

“I held you in my arms,” she said. “You seemed to get your breath better that way, and then you slept at last.”

“While you held me?” he mused. “How long did you hold me in your arms, Pomona?”

“My lord,” she said, “the whole night.”

Upon this he kept silence quite a long time; and she sat down on her stool again and waited. She had nursed him and saved him, and now he would soon be well; she ought surely to rejoice, but (she knew not why) her heart was like lead. Presently he called her; he would be lifted, shifted, his pillows were hot, his bed-clothes pressed on him. As she bent over him, the fretful expression suddenly was smoothed from his features.

“I remember now,” he said, with a singular gleam in his eyes. “I remember, Pomona; you kissed me.”

* * * * *

My Lord Blantyre began thereafter to have more consecutive recollections of that time of dreams; and when the night came, he felt mightily injured, mightily affronted to find that the shadow of the watcher, flung by the rushlight against the wall, belonged to a bent and aged figure, with a grotesque profile, instead of the mild grey angel that had soothed him hitherto. So deep seemed the injury, so cruel the

neglect, that the ill-used patient could not find it in him to consent to sleep, but tossed till his bed grew unbearable; pettishly refused to drink from Mall's withered hand; was quite positive that the pain in his side was very bad again and that his angry heart-beats were due to fever.

It drew towards midnight. Again Mall brought the cooling drink and offered it patiently. Like an old owl she stood and blinked. Her toothless jaws worked.

He made an angry gesture of refusal; the cup was dashed from her hand and fell clattering on the boards. She cried out in dismay, and he in fury—

“Out of my sight, you Hecate!”

Then suddenly Pomona stood beside them. So soft her tread that neither had heard her come.

“Lord, be good to us! the poor gentleman's mad again!” whimpered Mall, as she went down on her knees to mop.

Pomona was clad in a white wrapper, well starched; the wide sleeves spread out like wings. Her hair hung in one loose plait to her knees.

“You look like a monstrous beautiful great angel!” cried he. Her hand was on his pulse. He was as pleased and soothed as a naughty infant when it is lifted from its cradle and nursed.

She stood and seemed encircled by the fragrance of the sacrificed cup; lavender and thyme and other sweet and wholesome herbs.

She thought he wandered, yet his pulse was steady-ing itself under her finger into a very reasonable pace for a convalescent. She looked down at him with puzzled eyes.

“What is it, my lord?”

"Prithee," said he. "Though you live so quiet here, my maid, and keep your secrets so well, you would have known, would you not, had there been a death at the Castle?"

"Surely, my lord," she said, and bent closer to comfort him. "Nay, it must be that you have the fever again, I fear. Nay, all is well with your kinsfolk. Mall, haste thee with another cup of the drink. Is the wound painful, my good lord, and how goes it with the breathing?"

As she bent, he caught her great plait in both his hands and held it so that she could not straighten herself.

"It would go vastly better," cried he, "I should breathe with infinite more ease, my sweet nurse, and forget that I had ever had a gaping hole to burn the side of me, could you but tell me that there had been even a trifle of sickness at the house beyond. Come, thy sword was red, you know! It was not red for nothing. Was not Master Leech sent for in haste to draw more blood?—the excellent physician thou mindest, who helped thy worthy father so pleasantly from this world?"

She would have drawn from him in soft sorrow and shame, for she understood now, but that his weak fingers plucked her back. Truly there seemed to be a devil in his eyes. Yet she was too tender of him not to humour him, as the mother her spoilt child.

"Hast heard, Mall, of aught amiss at the Castle?" quoth she, turning her head to address the old woman at the fire.

"There was a gentleman out hunting with the Lady Julia o' Thursday," answered the crone, "as

carried his arm in a sling, I heard tell; though he rode with the best of them."

"Faugh!"

Lord Blantyre loosed Pomona's tress and lay back sullenly. He drank the cup when she held it to his lips in the same sullen silence; but when she shook his pillows and smoothed his sheet and cooed to him in the dear voice of his dream: "Now sleep!" he murmured complainingly: "Not if you leave me."

Pomona's heart gave a great leap, and a rose-flush grew on her face, lovelier than ever sunrise or fire-glow had called there.

"I will not leave you, my lord," she replied. Her voice filled the whole room with deep harmony.

He woke in the grey dawn, and there sat Pomona, her eyes dreaming, her hands clasped, her face a little stern in its serene, patient weariness. He cried to her sharply, because of the sharpness with which his heart smote him.

"Hast sat thus the whole night long?"

"Surely!" said she.

"Well, to bed with you then," he bade her impatiently. "Nay, I want nought. Send one of your wenches to my bell—some Sue or Pattie, so it be a young one. And you—to bed, to bed!"

But she would not leave him till she had tested how it stood with him, according to her simple skill. As her hand rested on his brow, "Why Pomona?" queried he.

"My lord?"

"Pomona. 'Tis a marvellous fine name, and marvellous fitting to a nymph of the orchard. Pomona!"

"Indeed," she answered him in her grave way, "Sue or Pattie would better become me. But my

mother was book-learned, sir, and town-bred, and had her fancies. She sat much in the orchard the spring that I was born."

"Aye," he mused. "So thy mother was book-learned and fanciful!" Then briskly he asked her: "Wouldst thou not like to know my name, Pomona? Unless, indeed, you know it already?"

She shook her head.

"Why, what a woman are you! In spite of apples, no daughter of Eve at all."

She still shook her head, and smiling faintly: "To me it could make no difference," she said.

"Well, now you shall know," he said, "and take it to your maiden dreams. I am Rupert, Earl of Blantyre."

"What!" she cried quickly, "the——" she broke off and hesitated. "The great Earl of Blantyre," she pursued then, dropping her eyes: "the King's friend!"

His laugh rang out somewhat harsh.

"What—so solitary a nymph, so country-hidden, and yet so learned of the gossip of the great world!"

"People talk," she murmured, crimsoning as in deepest shame.

"And you know what they call me. No! not the Great Earl, hypocrite, the Wicked Earl! You knew it?"

She bent her head.

He laughed again. "Why, now, what a nightmare for you! Here he lies, and oh, Pomona, you have prolonged his infamous career!"

* * * * *

The Wicked Earl was an angelic patient for two days. On the third he was promoted to the oak

settle, wrapped in a garment of the late farmer's, of which he made much kindly mirth. It was a golden day of joy in the lonely farmhouse.

On the fourth morning, however, he wakened to a mood of seriousness, not to say ill-temper. His first words were to request writing-paper and a quill, ink, and the great seal that hung on his watch-chain.

Pomona stood by while he wrote ; helped him with paper and wax. She saw into how deep a frown his brows were contracted, and her heart seemed altogether to fail her. She expected the end ; it was coming swiftly, and not as she had expected it.

"May I trespass on your kindness ; so far as to send a horseman with this letter to the Castle?" said he very formally.

She took it from him with her country curtsy.

"You will be leaving us, my lord?"

He glanced at her through his drooping lids.

"Can I trespass for ever on your hospitality?"

She went forth with the letter quickly, without another word.

It was but little after noon when there came a great clatter into the simple farmyard that was wont to echo to no brisker sounds than the lumbering progress of the teamsters and their wagon, or the patient steps of Pomona's dairy-cows. A great coach with four horses and running footmen had drawn up before the farm-porch. A man in dark livery, with a sleek, secret face, slipped down from the rumble, reached for a valise and disappeared round the house. The coach door opened and the Lady Julia Majendie descended, followed by no less a person than my Lord Majendie himself, who was seldom known to leave his library, much less to accom-

pany his daughter out driving. His presence marked a great occasion. And with them was a very fine lady—a stranger to any of the farm—a little lady with dark hair in ringlets and high plumes to a great hat, and a dress that shone with as many pale colours as a pigeon's breast. She sniffed: and "Oh!" cried she in very high, loud tones, pressing a vinaigrette to her nose, "can my poor brother be in such a place and yet alive?"

"Hush, madam!" said Lord Majendie somewhat testily, for Pomona stood in the door. "I am sure we owe nought but gratitude to this young woman."

He was a gaunt, snuffy, untidy old man, in a dilapidated wig, but his eyes were shrewd and kindly behind the large, gold-rimmed spectacles. He peered at Pomona, pale and beautiful.

Lady Julia had evidently inherited her father's short sight, for she, too, was staring through an eyeglass. She carried it on a gold chain, and when she lifted it to one eye, her small, fair face took an air of indescribable impertinence.

She interrupted father and friend, coming to the front with a scarcely perceptible movement of pointed elbows.

"Bring us instantly to Lord Blantyre."

"This way, an it please you," said Pomona.

She led them in. And there in the great kitchen, well within the glow from the deep hearth, propped on patchwork cushions, wrapped in blue homespun, lay the invalid.

The ladies were picking their steps across the flags with a great parade of lifting silken skirts; the worthy old scholar, Lord Majendie, was following, with an expression of benign, childlike interest, but

all three seemed struck by the same amazement, almost amounting to consternation. Lord Blantyre lifted his pallid, black-bearded countenance and looked at them with a gaze of uncompromising ill-humour.

"Good Lord, brother!" exclaimed the little lady with the ringlets, at last. She made a faint lurch against Lady Julia.

"If your sisterly feelings are too much for you and you are contemplating a swoon, pray be kind enough to accomplish it elsewhere, Alethea," said Lord Blantyre.

"Oh, my excellent young friend! oh, my dear lord! Tut, tut, tut! I should hardly have known you," ejaculated the old man. "You must tell us how this has come about; we must get you home. Tush! you must not speak. I see you are yet but weakly. My good young woman, this has been a terrible business—nay, I have no doubt he does your nursing infinite credit; but why not have let us know? Tut, tut!"

Before Pomona could speak—and, indeed, as she had no excuse to offer, the words were slow in coming—her patient intervened curtly—

"I would not permit her to tell you," quoth he.

She glanced at him startled; his eyes were averted.

"Oh, my lord! this is cruel hearing for us!" minced Lady Julia.

She might have spoken to the wall for all the effect her smile and ogle produced on him. She turned her glass upon Pomona then and ran it up and down her till the poor girl felt herself so coarse, so common, so ugly, that she could have wished herself dead.

"Pray, Lord Majendie," said Blantyre, "is Colonel Craven yet with you?"

Lady Alethea tossed her head, flushed, and shot a look, half defiance, half fear, at her brother.

He propped himself up on his elbow, turned and surveyed her with a sneering smile.

"How pale and wasted art thou, my fair Alethea! Hast been nursing the wounded hero and pining with his pangs? or is't perchance all fond fraternal anguish concerning my unworthy self? Oh, see you, I know what an uproar you made about me all over the countryside, what a hue and cry for the lost brother!"

"A plague on it, Julia!" said Lord Majendie, scratching his wig perplexedly and addressing his daughter in a loud whisper, "what ails the fellow? Does he wander, think you?"

But Lady Alethea seemed to find a meaning in the sick man's words, for she tossed her head once more and answered sharply:

"No, brother, I made no hue and cry for you, for 'tis not the first time it has been your pleasure to play truant and leave your loving friends all without news. How was I to know that you were more sorely hurt than Colonel Craven? He left you, he told us, standing by a tree—laughing at his pierced arm. You are not wont to come out of these affairs so ill."

That they were of the same blood could not be doubted, for it was the very same sneer that sat on both their mouths.

"And pray, since we must bandy words," she went on, gaining yet more boldness, "why did you thus keep me wilfully in suspense?"

"Because," said he sweetly, "I was too ill for thy nursing, my Alethea."

"I presume," said she, "you had a nurse to your fancy?"

Her black eyes rolled flashing on Pomona. The Earl made no reply.

"Let me assure your lordship," put in his would-be host here quickly, "that Colonel Craven is gone."

"'Tis well, then," replied Blantyre ceremoniously, "and I will, with your permission, this very night avail myself of your hospitality for a few days; but you will, I fear, have to send a litter for me. To sit in a coach is yet beyond me."

And while the good-natured nobleman instantly promised compliance, Lord Blantyre, waving away further discourse with a gesture, went on wearily:

"Let me beg of you now not to remain here or keep these ladies in surroundings so little suited to their gentility. And the sooner, my good lord, you can despatch that litter, the sooner shall you have the joy of my company. Farewell, fair Julia, for but a brief space. I trust that you and Colonel Craven enjoyed the chase the other day. We shall meet soon again, sister; pray you bear up against our present parting."

Both the ladies swept him such very fine curtseys that the homely kitchen seemed full of the rustle of silk. Lady Julia Majendie had a little fixed smile on her lips.

The farm-servants were all watching at the windows to see the great ladies get into their coach, to see it wheel about with the four horses clattering and curvetting. Pomona and Lord Blantyre were alone. She stood, her back against the wall, her

head held high—not in pride, for Pomona knew no pride, but with the natural carriage of her perfect strength and balance. Her eyes looked forth, grieving yet untearful, her mouth was set into lines of patient endurance. He regarded her darkly.

"I go this evening, Pomona."

"Aye, my lord."

The tall, wooden clock ticked off a heavy minute.

"Is my man here?" asked Lord Blantyre. "Bid him come to me, then, to help me to my room."

His lordship's toilet was a lengthy proceeding, for neither his strength nor his temper was equal to the strain. But it was at length accomplished; and, perfumed, shaven, clothed once again in fine linen and silk damask, wrapped in a great, furred cloak, Lord Blantyre sat in the wooden armchair and drank the cordial that Pomona had prepared him.

He was panting with his exertions, his heart was fluttering, but Pomona's recipes were cunning; in a little while he felt his pulses calm down and a glow of power return to him; and with the help of his cane and his servant he was able to advance towards the door.

"The young woman is outside waiting to take leave of your lordship," volunteered the sleek Craik.

His master halted and fixed him with an arrogant eye.

"The young woman of the farm," explained the valet glibly. "And knowing your lordship likes me to see to these details, I have brought a purse of gold—twenty pieces, my lord."

He stretched out his hand and chinked the silken bag as he spoke.

"For whom is that?" asked Lord Blantyre.

The man stared.

"For the young woman, my lord."

Lord Blantyre steadied himself with the hand that gripped the speaker's arm; then, lifting the cane with the other, struck the fellow across the knuckles so sharply that with a howl he let the purse fall.

"Pick it up," said the Wicked Earl; "put it into your pocket and remember, for the future, that the servant who presumes to know his master's business least understands his own."

The litter was brought to the door of his chamber and they carried him out through the kitchen to the porch; and there, where Pomona stood waiting, he bade them halt and set it down. She leaned towards him to look on him, she told herself, for the last time. Her heart contracted to see him so wan and exhausted.

"Good-bye, Pomona," said he, gazing up into her sorrowful eyes, distended in the evening dimness. He had seen a deer look at him thus, in the dusk, out of a thicket.

"Good-bye, my lord," said she.

"Ah, Pomona," said he, "I made a sweeter journey the day I came here!"

And without another word to her he signed to the men and they buckled to their task again.

Her heart shuddered as she watched the slow procession pass into the shadows. They might have been bearing a coffin. With the instinct of her inarticulate grief, she went to seek the last memory of him in his room. By the light of a flaring tallow candle, she found Lord Blantyre's man repacking

his master's valise. He looked offensively at her as she entered.

"Young woman," said he, shaking his head, "you have taken a very great liberty."

Then picking up the coarse white shift and surveying it with an air of intense disgust. "'Tis a wonder," quoth he, "his lordship didn't die of this."

* * * * *

"I fear, my fair Julia, that, fondly as I should love it, I shall never call you sister."

Julia turned at the flier and flung a glance of acute anger at her friend.

"If you had not been yourself so determined to have the nursing of Colonel Craven's wound, my dearest Alethea," responded she sweetly, "the friendly desire of your heart might be in a better way of accomplishment. And oh!" she fanned herself and tittered, "I pity you, my poor Alethea, I do indeed, when I think of those wasted attentions!"

Lady Alethea had her feelings less under control than her cool-blooded friend. Her dark cheek em-purpled, her full lips trembled.

"My woman tells me," proceeded Julia, "that the creature Craik, your brother's man, hath no doubt of my Lord Blantyre's infatuation. 'Pomona!' he will call in his sleep—Pomona! 'Tis the wench's name. I wish you joy of your sister-in-law, in good sooth!"

Lady Alethea wheeled upon her with an eye of fire. "Need my brother wed the woman because he calls upon her name?" she mocked.

"If I know my lord your brother, he might well wed her even because he need not . . ." smiled the other. "Now you are warned. 'Tis none of my con-

cern, I thank my Providence! You will be saved the wage of a dairymaid, at least."

Alethea's waving colour, her flurried breath, bore witness to discomposure.

"My Lord Blantyre," pursued Lady Julia relentlessly, "has ever taken pleasure in astonishing the world."

Lady Alethea clenched her hands.

"Your father rules here : let him transport the slut !"

"Nay," said Julia. She placed her hand upon the heaving shoulder and looked at her friend with a singular light in her pale yet brilliant eyes. "Do you think to break a man of a fancy by such measures? 'Twould be as good as forging the ring. Nay, my sweet, I can better help thee—aye, and give thee an hour's sport besides."

And as Alethea raised questioning eyes, Julia shook her silver-fair ringlets and laughed again.

"Leave it to me," quoth she.

* * * * *

"Will Mistress Pomona favour the Lady Julia Majendie with her company at the Castle?"

This was the message carried to the farmhouse by a mounted servant. He had a pillion behind him on the stout palfrey and his orders were, he said, to bring Mistress Pomona back with him.

Pomona came running out, with the harvest sun shine on her copper hair ; her cheek was drained of blood.

"Is my lord ill again?" she queried breathlessly.

The man shook his head ; either he was dull or well drilled.

Pomona mounted behind him without a second

more delay : just as she was, bare-headed, her apron stained with apple-juice and her sleeves rolled up above her elbows. She had no thought for herself and only spoke to bid the servant hurry.

For a fortnight she had heard no word of her patient. In her simple heart she could conceive no other reason for being summoned now than because once more he needed her nursing.

But when she reached the Castle and was passed with mocking ceremony from servant to servant, the anxious questions died on her lips ; and when she was ushered, at length, into a vast bedchamber, hung with green silk, gold fringed, and was greeted by Lady Julia, all in green herself, like a mermaid, smiling sweetly at her from between her pale ringlets, she was so bewildered that she forgot even to curtsy. She never heeded how the tirewoman, who had last received her, tittered as she closed the door.

"A fair morning to you, mistress," said Lady Julia. "I am sensible of your kindness in coming to my hasty invitation."

"Madam !" faltered Pomona, and remembered her *révérence* ; "I am ever at your service, honourable madam ; I hope my lord is not sick again."

"My father ?" mocked the mermaid, running her white hand through her curls. But Pomona neither understood nor practised the wiles of women.

"I meant my Lord Blantyre," she said.

"Oh, the Lord Earl, your patient ! Nay, it goes better with him. Oh ! he has been sadly, sadly. We have had a sore and anxious time ; such a wound as his, neglected——" she shook her ringlets.

Pomona's lip suddenly trembled, she caught it between her teeth to steady it.

"Ah!" said Julia, interrupting herself and turning on her chair, "here comes the Lady Alethea."

Alethea entered, mincing on high-heeled shoes, her cherry lips pursed, her dark eyes dancing as if a pair of mischievous sprites had taken lodging there. She gazed at Pomona, so large, so work-stained, so incongruous a figure in the great, luxurious room. Her nostrils dilated. She looked as wicked as a kid.

"My brother," said she, addressing her friend, though she kept staring at Pomona, "has heard of this wench's arrival. He would speak with her."

"I will go with you, even now," said Pomona.

Both the ladies shrieked; so did the maid who had followed Lady Alethea into the room.

"My good creature! in that attire?"

"My brother, so fastidious, so suffering!"

"And she," cried the tirewoman, taking up the note, "still with the stench of the saucepan about her! Positively, madam, the room reeks."

If Pomona carried any savours beyond those of lavender and the herbs she loved, it was of good, sweet apples and fragrant, burnt sugar. But she stood in her humiliation and felt herself more unfit for all the high company than the beasts of her farm-yard.

"You must not take it unkindly, child," said Lady Julia, with her cruel little laugh and her soft voice; "but my Lord Blantyre, you see, hath ever a great distaste of all that is homely and uncomely. He hath suffered extraordinarily in that respect of late. We must humour him."

Truly Pomona was punished. She marvelled now at herself, remembering what her presumption had been.

"I will go home, madam, if you permit me."

Again the ladies cried out. To thwart the invalid—'twas impossible. Was the girl mad?—Nay, she would do as they bid? 'Twas well, then.—Lady Julia, so kind was she, would help to clothe her in some better apparel and make her fit to present herself. The while the Lady Alethea would return to her post of assiduous nurse and inform his lordship of Pomona's speedy attendance.

Pomona gave herself into their hands.

Lord Blantyre lay on a couch in the sunshine. A fountain played merrily to his right; to his left his sister sat demurely at embroidery. In spite of her ladyship's melancholy account, the patient seemed to have gained marvellously in strength. But he was in no better humour with the world than on the last day of his stay at the farm.

He tossed and fretted among his rich cushions.

"She tarries," he said irritably, for the twentieth time. "You are all in league to plague me. Why did you tell me she was coming?"

"My good brother," answered the fair embroideress, tilting her head to fling him the family sneer, "I pray you curb your impatience, for yonder comes your siren."

Here was Julia indeed undulating towards them, and after her—Pomona!

Lord Blantyre sat up suddenly and stared. Then he fell back on his cushions and shot a look at Alethea before which she quailed.

Stumbling in high heels that tripped her at every step, she who had been wont to move free as a goddess; scarce able to breathe in the laced bodice that pressed her form out of all its natural shapeliness,

and left so much of her throat bare that the white skin was all crimson in shame down to the borrowed kerchief; her artless, bewildered face raddled with white and red, her noble head scarcely recognisable through the bunching curls that sat so strangely each side of it—what Pomona was this?

“Here is your kind nurse,” fluted Lady Julia. “She had a fancy to bedizen herself for your eyes. I thought ’twould please you, my lord, if I humoured the creature.”

“Every one is to be humoured here,” thought poor Pomona vaguely.

“Come to his lordship, child,” bade Julia, her tones tripped up with laughter.

Pomona tottered yet a pace or two and then halted. Taller even than the tall Lady Julia, the lines of her generous womanhood took up the silken skirt to absurd brevity, exposing the awkward, twisting feet. Nymph no longer was she, but a huge painted puppet. Only the eyes were unchanged, Pomona’s roedeer eyes, grieving and wondering, shifting from side to side in dumb pleading. Truly this was an excellent jest of Lady Julia Majendie’s!

It was strange that Lady Alethea, bending closer and closer over her work, should have no laughter left after that single glance from her brother’s eyes; and that Lord Blantyre himself should show such lack of humorous appreciation. There was a heavy silence. Pomona tried to draw a breath to relieve her bursting anguish, but in vain; she was held as in a vice. Her heart fluttered; she felt as if she must die.

“Pomona,” said Lord Blantyre suddenly, “come closer.”

He reached and caught up his sister's scissors from her knee, and leaning forward, snipped the laces that strained across the fine scarlet satin of Pomona's cruel bodice.

"Now breathe," ordered he.

And while the other two were staring, unable to credit their eyes, Pomona's prison fell apart; and, over her heaving bosom, her thick white shift took its own noble folds.

Then the woman in her awoke and revolted. She flung from her feet the high-heeled shoes; and, with frenzied hands tearing down her mockery of a head-dress, she ran to the fountain and began to dash the paint from her face. The tears streamed down her cheeks as she laved them.

"Sweet and gentle ladies," said the Wicked Earl—his tones cut the air like a fine blade—"I thank you for your most excellent demonstration of the superiority of your high breeding. May I beg you both to retire upon your triumph and leave me to deal with this poor, inferior wretch, since you have now most certainly convinced me that she can never aspire to such gentility as yours?"

Alethea rose, and scattering her silks on one side, her embroidery on the other, walked straight away down the terrace, without casting a look behind her. Julia ran after her with skipping step, caught her under the arm, and the laughter of her malice rang out long after she herself had disappeared.

"Pomona," said Lord Blantyre.

Often he had called to her, in feverish complaint, or anger, or pettishly like a child, but never in such a tone as this. She came to him, as she had always come; and then she stood in shame before him, her

long hair streaming, the tears rolling down her cheeks, her hands folded at her throat, her shapely feet gripping the ground in Julia Majendie's green silk stockings. Slowly his gaze enveloped her. All at once he smiled; and then, meeting her grieving eyes, he grew grave again and suddenly his haughty face was broken up by tenderness. He caught one dripping twist of hair and pulled her towards him after his gentle, cruel fashion. She fell on her knees beside him and hid her face in his cushions.

"Kiss me, Pomona," said he.

"Oh, my lord," she said, "spare me; I am only a poor girl!"

Many a time she had dreamed since the morning in the orchard that she was carrying that bleeding body, her lips on the dying roses of his lips; but never, in her humility, had she, even in her sleep, thought of herself as in his arms. This was no dream, yet so he clasped her.

He bent his dark head over her radiant hair, his voice dropped words sweeter than honey, more healing than balm, into her heart that was still so bruised that it could scarce beat to joy.

"When I first beheld you in the orchard, I was sorry that I might have to die, Pomona, because you were in life. You carried me in your arms, and kept my soul from passing by the touch of your lips. When the fever burnt me, you brought me coolness—you lifted me and gave me breath. All night you held me. Patient, strong Pomona! You bore with all my humours. You came to me in the night from your sleep, all in white like an angel, your bare feet on the boards. Oh, my gentle nurse, my humble love, my mate, my wife!"

She raised her head to gaze at him. Yet she took the wonder, like a child, not disclaiming, not questioning.

"Oh!" she said, with a deep, soft sigh.

He fondly pushed the tangled hair from her brow.

"And shall a man make shift with sham and hollow artifice, when he can possess truth itself? They put paint on your cheeks, my Pomona, and tricked you out in gauds: and behold, I saw how great was the true woman beside the painted doll!"

He kissed her lips; and then he cried:

"Oh, Golden Apple, how is the taste of thee sweet and pure!"

And after a silence he said to her faintly, for he was still weak for such rapture:

"Lift me, my love, and let me lie awhile against your woman's heart, for never have I drawn such sweet breath as in your arms."



HAGAR OF THE FARM



VII

HAGAR OF THE FARM

SNOW without and bleak wind and moorland as wide as the sea, as flat and as ceaselessly undulating, though now all lost in the darkness of a stormy December night. Within, the great farm kitchen, the ruddy hearth; no light but that of the fire that leaps and soars up the chimney and is reflected a score of times on copper-pan faces, on polished dresser and settle, on the yellow dial of the grandfather's clock; and the pipe of the wind round the corner to give zest to the sense of security and warmth; and the ghosts of the dead lilac bushes in their snow winding-sheets peering in through the uncurtained mullioned window to heighten by contrast the homely cheer indoors.

The table is spread for supper—a snowy cloth, a whole-meal loaf, a brass coffee-pot, and a comb of amber honey. On the hob bubbles a pot, with now and then a jet of appetising steam: from upstairs comes the drowsy voice of a child.

In an ancient high-backed chair within the bright circle nearest the fire sits a dame and turns her spinning-wheel with pleasant whir; white-capped; aged, but with the looks of handsome age—the silver hair, the apple skin, the comfortable rotundity. And

moving with light step from dresser to table, from table to fireplace, comes and goes the mistress of the farm herself, tall beyond the usual height of the sturdy Devonshire lass; with a swaying ease of movement and a delicate fulness of form; a face clear brown beneath its white cap-frill and its upward swell of crisp chestnut hair; eyes, the colour of the brown running brook; lips, a flower; teeth, a flash. It is not for her riches alone that Mistress Herne is courted by every bachelor and widower of note within thirty miles around and more.

The table laid, she takes a little stool and draws it towards the fire and sits leaning forward, gazing into the flames with abstracted stare, turning round and round on her plump brown finger the single circlet of a wedding-ring.

Presently the spinning dame allows the wheel to revolve into silence and two shrivelled hands to fall upon her knee.

"Ah, well-a-day," she says, "but it is lonely here, with never a man about the place these winter evenings! Eh, dear o' me, hark to the wind without! Those were different days in your good father's (my good brother's) time, when I have seen five handsome beards wagging round that table, and other fare upon it, I promise you, than these squeamish scraps. Alas, all gone now; poor master and those fine lads beneath the sod! Is it not time, Hagar, that you should think of giving yourself a mate and the farm a master?"

"Do you remember what day it is, aunt?" says the young woman. "Friday, the 13th of December." Her voice is round and sweet and grave, with a chord in it like that in the strings of a lute. "'Twas just such another night; the first snowstorm of the winter

five years ago!" She looks down at her hand and turns the wedding-ring.

Mistress Deborah's cheek flames into a streaky scarlet. Her cap shakes with tremulous motion.

"Nay, and I thought better of you, niece," she cries shrilly. "I thought you had more pride, more decent feeling of your woman's worth. Still lamenting that good-for-nothing scamp who abandoned you and the child, the poor little tender lovely lamb unborn, whose face he had not yet seen. Wedded you for your money and then abandoned you, the lazy beggar lout, with his bold gipsy face and never a farthing in his pocket, nor a decent name to his back that ever folks had heard of! A vagrant gipsy wanderer, black visaged, black hearted, sprung from no one knew where; your poor good father's common hired labourer, your own paid servant! Mistress Herne! It sticks in my gills and all our good ale will never wash it down. Mistress Herne! pah, my blood goes a-boiling at the gipsy sound! Come now, is it not time to change the ill-sounding name for that of some good Christian man?"

"'Twas just on such an evening as this," again says the younger woman, all unheeding, and as if but speaking her own thoughts aloud, "five years ago. We had been wedded nine months and we looked for the coming of the little one after the primroses. We had words; 'twas something about the clover field, I think. I know my heart grew hot because of his insolence—he whom I had raised to such honour. And you sat as you do now, Aunt Deb, and you spoke loud words in between our bitter speeches. And at last says he, and strikes the table: 'Am I not your lord and husband, and must I not rule and

you obey? Am I not master, Hagar?' And you laughed aloud and said: 'Hark, the dunghill cock, how he crows!' And I said: 'Remember, Jim, what you are and what you owe me.' And said he then, very quick: 'What do you mean by that?' And said I: 'Why, that I have given you everything, that I wedded you a beggar, and that this serves me well for my folly.' Then he went very white all over his face, and came quite close to me, and shook as if with fever. 'Are we not equal because of our love?' said he; 'I the husband and you the wife?' And then, because no woman could bear in patience the way in which he ever made little of all that he owed me, seeing that the farm was mine, and the money mine, and every morsel he ate mine, I spoke out my mind in scorn and told him my thoughts. My pride was up, and I wished that he should know the truth at last. 'And is it the money,' says he, 'the cursed, wretched money that comes between us? Why then, Hagar, never a mouthful of food shall cross my lips in this house again that I have not paid for. I will go forth,' he said, 'and get gold to make us equal. If ever I come back to you,' and he took up his old hat, 'it will be that I am as rich as you.' He stood a second and looked at me just there on the threshold; his face was as white as new milk in the pail. And I laughed at him; I did not believe that he meant it. Many other such angry things we had said to each other during our quarrels. But as I turned away I heard the door shut sharp. And you said: 'Set a beggar on horseback, and good riddance to bad rubbish!' And I sat down on this stool and began to cry, for I was a hardly treated woman. He never came back; and baby was born with the lilac."

HAGAR OF THE FARM

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Mistress Deborah starts her wheel again and, over its delicate song, speaks very loud and very fast.

"Good riddance to bad rubbish, did I say? Then so say I again. And you know the worthless fellow is dead, for was there not a dark gipsy man found drowned in the river but a fortnight after your miserable husband left you? And did not the coroner say that likely enough it was Jim, only that neither man nor mortal could say for certain who it was because the poor, castaway, desolate corpse had lain so long and had been so beaten about the stones? And anyhow, did not the fellow most basely desert you, my poor, dear, lone, lorn niece, at the very moment that any man, if he were a man, would have stood most of his wife? And is it not now five years that you have heard no tidings of him from sea nor land? And is it not likely enough that he who came so suddenly to us and left us so suddenly may have had a wife already, and that your marriage was no marriage at all, and he has gone back to his hedge Meg and his black brats? And for the sake of the poor little dear darling son upstairs, ought you not now to think seriously of taking a worthy spouse? There is Master Collier of the Red Farm: a worthy man, a very worthy man, and your lands join. Has he not put the question every Sunday morning for the last three years? A very worthy man and who will not have your 'no.'"

"Master Collier!" says Hagar, and curls her lip. "He is old and grey, and holds his money-bags too tight for me, aunt; and he limps upon one leg, so that e'en to walk to church with him is like driving a lame horse."

"Why, then, there is Luke of the Redlands; and

what can you say against Luke? A noble lad, his father's eldest son, young enough to please; and, Lord, what legs! those be legs! were I but a little younger I vow they would make my heart to leap."

"Luke? Luke, with his red hair, who never can pass an inn but he must drink, nor a maiden but he must pinch her cheek, nor a racecourse but he must bet? Luke has good legs say you, aunt? I trow they'd soon run away with my farm."

"Why, my Lord in heaven, there now! I did but mention Luke and Master Collier because they are of the neighbourhood, and I was always a neighbourly woman. Thank God, there are others a plenty. Is there not Master Mallock of Ivybridge, with his splendid drapery establishment? What would you think of him? He looks at you hard enough."

"Aye, aunt, he looks at me as if he would measure me by the yard. Would you have me mate with trade? I hate such peddling spirits."

"Then Gabriel Hope of the Tabey Inn; and Mr. Simon; and young John Baring, with his lovely yellow shining curls; what say you to them?"

"I say no." The young woman rises, stirs the fire, and peers into the bubbling pot. "Ten minutes more," she says, "and supper will be ready. I tell you, aunt, that when I wed again I will wed better. I wedded once from a girl's folly, for a pair of blue eyes in a black face, and the music of a glib tongue—poor Jim, he was a likely lad! When next I wed, it will be neither for legs nor curls; I will wed a gentleman. Hark ye! last fair-day at Tavistock I met a gipsy woman. She crossed my hand with gold and she read my fate. 'You wedded poor,'

she said, 'but there are riches coming—a grand dark gentleman from across the sea. He will come riding on a great black horse; you will know him by his gold chain and his gold ring, and he will carry more gold in his pockets than you have ever seen in your life, rich as you are. Now I have told you,' she said, 'so be warned and keep yourself for your luck. Your star is high, my pretty lady,' she said, 'and you will ride in your carriage, and your son shall live with the lords of the land, if you but know how to meet your fate; but there's many lose it because they be too quick with it or too slow.'

"A thieving, heathen old wife's tale! Some stealing, priggish jailbird of the roads!" cries Mistress Deborah, and breaks her thread in her wrath. "You, with the education of a lady born, all at the genteel seminary at Tavistock. Fie on you, Hagar!"

"I dreamt three times running," says the other, "of a great ship ploughing across the sea, and in its prow a man looking out for land. I could not see his face, but he had a gold ring on his hand and a gold chain on his breast; and I have had an itching in my elbow ever since the morning; and I found a stranger in my tea at breakfast—sure sign there is company coming. My luck has turned, and time too! To-day it is five years since Jim left me. So see you, Aunt Deb, I take off my wedding-ring and give it to you; and when my gentleman comes to fetch me he will know at first sight that I am free."

She stands in the glow of the firelight and pulls the circlet from her finger; and the old woman takes it grumbling and slips it into her apron pocket.

And one outside, leading a horse up to the door, whose footprints fall noiselessly upon the thick snow,

looks through the window and sees the ruddy cheer, and gazes on the splendid figure of the young woman with an eager, hungry eye.

She lifts the pot from the fire and pours its contents into a dish. The steam circles round her bent brown face, and savoury whiffs come floating out into the bitter purity of the night air.

The wind blows in gusts and the watcher is plastered all on one side with snow, and the horse shakes himself till his skin and trappings rattle.

"And so," says Mistress Deborah in a tone of high sarcasm, "you are expecting some fine lord from over the seas to come knocking at the farm-door to claim you as his bride. Alas! that I should live to see the day: my poor dear, only brother's child, stark, staring mad!"

Hagar smiles. Her teeth are white and lovely behind her flower-like lips. She lifts her arms behind her head and looks smiling toward the door.

"My God!" says the man outside, and leaves the window.

"Some day, some night," says Hagar, "you will hear his knock, aunt. I am not going to spoil my luck, my beautiful luck, by listening to your croaking."

"Oh, whatever shall I do with this bad lost undutiful niece?" cries Aunt Deb. And then there comes a masterful knock upon the great door, and both women start and stare and think they must have dreamt it; when again it comes, and "Mercy save us!" cries the dame, and "What did I tell you?" cries the niece, and tosses up her chin, and laughs aloud as she flies across the kitchen with pattering tiptoe step to lift the bar.

The door sways back with ponderous creak, the gusty wind comes eddying in and the snow floats upon it and lies white an instant and melts upon the red, warm floor. Framed by the doorway a man stands looking in. His face shows livid between the shade of a slouching hat and the black curls of his beard. From within the room the firelight flashes on the gold chain that hangs across his breast and darts back many-hued from the facets of a ring upon the hand that holds a horse's bridle. And over his shoulder peers the gentle face of his steed with a white star on its forehead and a velvet nose sniffing rest and stable.

"Save us and bless us!" cries Mistress Deborah, peering from behind the door. She drops a tremulous curtsey, and catches her niece by a gather of her gown to whisper fearfully in her ear: "Saw one ever so black and bilious-green a visage, and not a boy nearer than the stable! Save us and bless us, Hagar, he may murder us all and none the wiser till dawn o' day!"

But Hagar says:

"Tush, aunt, this is a gentleman. Look at his ring." As she speaks she comes forward eagerly and makes her curtsey too, not too deep a one, but such as befits the lady of the house; and—"Sir," she says, "what may be your will? It is a stormy night," she adds, "and the moors are wild; perhaps you have lost your way?"

The stranger clutches at his hat and pulls it off, and his countenance, uncovered against the dense blackness of his hair, is as yellow as old ivory.

"You speak truly," he says, "I have wandered from my road, and lost myself all in the black night.

But the light of the hearth shone out upon me like a star of heaven, and guided me to your door. Will you give me a night's shelter?"

Now to turn even a tramp from the doors of a moorland farm on a stormy night were to give a poor fellow human to death; to turn a gentleman away, one who came riding upon so satin-skinned a horse, and wore such a flashing ring and such heavy loops of chain, even Mistress Deborah, for all her old woman's fears, had not dreamt of such ill-breeding.

"You're kindly welcome, sir," she says.

And—"Come in," says Hagar, with her wide beautiful smile.

The man looks back at her with a darkling depth in his glance and makes as if he would step in upon her invitation, when the bridle, straining upon his arm, reminds him of his dumb companion.

"Make the beast fast to the door-post," says Hagar, "and I will send the girl to rouse the men to bring him into stable."

The stranger does as he is bid; and then from out of the cold and the storm he is shut into the warmth and glow of the kitchen.

He throws his cloak upon a wooden bench and stands revealed: a handsome personable man, in a rich dark traveller's suit, with high boots on shapely legs, fine linen upon a broad breast, and gold seals and charms hanging from his fob.

Hagar puts her head on one side to look at him, and nods approval to herself, and comes with a little skip to place a chair for him at the table.

"We were about to sup," she says; "I pray you, will you join us?"

"Allow me," cries he, and takes the chair from her

with a very courtly bow. She thinks that his manners are grander even than those of the duke himself at the last harvest-home dinner.

They sit and eat, but Hagar is not satisfied to serve ordinary fare to so extraordinary a guest ; and a bottle of her father's old Nantes brandy must be fetched from the cellar ; and rosy Dolly, her face still shining from her dive across the farmyard into the wet night, must draw a jug of the old, sweet home-brewed that was brewed at Hagar's own wedding and was not to have been tapped till the baptism of her son. It had not been tapped at all until this night, for that when little John was christened there was no heart for merry-making at the farm.

The stranger speaks little, but his eye follows Hagar with a strange look ; follows her in her quick flitting to and fro ; rests upon her as she sits and eats, and sinks into brooding when she leaves the room. He scarcely tastes the good, homely fare, but drinks the ale thirstily, while the women with such unwonted incitement talk for two and play each other off as women will.

Then comes the hour after supper, when even the most taciturn tongue is loosed. The stranger has allowed his hostess to pour him out a little glass of the brandy, and sits toying with it, half turned from the table, gazing upon the fire. Hagar has plied him with one or two questions during the meal ; has learnt that he comes from abroad, after many long years of exile ; that he is Devonshire born and yearns to the old haunts ; that he has set out this day from Ivy-bridge, despite his landlord's warning, hoping to reach Tavistock before nightfall, and has lost his way on the moors, as they knew. Now as he sits

and toys with his glass, he begins to question in his turn.

Are they not lonely in the midst of these wilds? Have they no man about except their servants?

"Your fair daughter, madam," he says, bowing to Mistress Deborah, "has she not yet given you a son and a protector?" He seems to hang upon the answer with a quickening breath.

Mistress Deborah is all volubility.

"Not daughter, no, sir, not in the flesh, though truly in the spirit, the dear old child of my love and care. . . . And we are told the flesh killeth and spirit quickeneth. . . . My brother's child, sir. She is now the mistress of the farm; and as for a husband, as for wedding, oh, aye! there was talk, there was talk, but young people are foolish——" Here she looks at Hagar, and Hagar lifts her chin with a pettish jerk.

"But surely," says the man and leans forward, and the strong white hand clutches the glass; "so fair a maid, though still unwedded, is at least pledged?"

"Unwedded, a maid!" shrills the dame. "Oh, there is where his honour mistakes. Oh, we have had a wedding too many already in this house—a good-for-nothing fellow, who ill-used his wife, a lad without a penny, sir. She was a child and knew no better; but now, thank God, all is over and she is free."

Hagar looks down and says no word. There is a moment's silence. The stranger sighs heavily, and Hagar, looking out at him from narrow lids, sees that he wears ear-rings in his ears, like a seafaring man.

Upstairs in the stillness the child gives a sudden cry. The stranger starts:

"You have a child," he says, and brushes his forehead, beaded suddenly with sweats.

"Yes, sir, a beautiful boy," cries the old dame; while Hagar frowns a minute. The gentleman hastily lifts the glass to his lips and drinks the spirit. When he puts it down his hand trembles.

"I fear you are cold," says Mistress Deborah. "'Twas fearful, fearsome weather for a lone wanderer all out in the wild waste in the middle of the night."

"No," replies he, "'tis but a touch of ague caught in India."

Hagar's eyes brighten. India: visions of gold, jewels, slaves, riches untold.

And now Aunt Deborah rises and hints to Hagar that they must see about the guest's room. The old clock has struck ten, jangling on its worn-out gong. Hagar rises, too, pouting a little, and rings the keys at her waist.

"I bid you good night, sir," says old Deborah, very grandly, and drops her curtsey; "our servant shall inform you when your bed is ready."

"Good night," says Hagar, and puts out her brown hand.

Her guest, standing tall above her, bows, takes it into his, holds it a moment, then bends and lays his lips upon it.

"I have not thought of rest yet," he says in a quick whisper in her ear; and Hagar notes, with a triumphant flutter at her breast, that his breath comes thick, that his eyes burn upon her. "Will you not come back to me awhile, when your good relative has gone to bed, and let us talk by this warm hearth? I will tell you tales," he says, "tales that shall send you sleeping with a glad heart."

Mistress Deborah's skirts have whisked out into the passage.

"Niece Hagar, child," she calls.

"Oh, sir," says Hagar. This fine gentleman's kiss upon her fingers tingles to her brain and sets it dancing. "Oh, sir," she says, and no more; and flies out of the kitchen, obedient to her aunt's call.

The stranger stands and clasps his hands, and wrings them above his head; and then he falls upon the settle and groans aloud.

"Pray God," he cries, "pray God she do not come."

He sits by the hearth and waits, his ear strained to the least sound, the wind without anon waxes to a furious shriek, anon wanes to a faint sigh. A mouse pipes in the wainscot; the great log in the fire falls with a crash and the flames go roaring up the chimney; and still his voiceless prayer goes up to heaven—with as desperate, as simple a faith as, when a child in the Exeter Workhouse, he prayed against blows and hunger.

"Pray God—pray God—she do not come."

There is a footfall without, a touch upon the lock, a flutter of woman's clothes, a faint laugh, and Hagar stands smiling. The man turns and rises.

"Pity it is," thinks Hagar, "he has so sallow a face, for 'twould be a very handsome gentleman."

"You have come back," says he, in a hoarse whisper.

"I have come back," she answers with a certain prim dignity, "to see if you need anything more this night. Your room is the first to the right at the top of the stairs; the sheets smell of lavender, and they are of my grandmother's spinning—such spinning

they say as folks know not of now. I trust you will rest well," she says and holds out her hand again.

"Will you not sit?" says he, and takes the tip of her fingers, and leads her to her aunt's chair. "Will you not sit and talk awhile? I have been so long exiled that it is music to hear the mother tongue again."

"'Tis hardly seemly," she says. But yet she sits and spreads her hands to the flames. The left hand feels strange without the wedding-ring. "But you are a gentleman, sir, therefore I am sure you mean honest by me."

He sits too on the settle, shades his face with his hand, and she feels his eyes upon her.

"Oh, Hagar, Hagar," cries the heart within him, "whom I have carried with me over seas and lands, in heats and frosts, in work, in rest; whom I have held nightly in my dreams, and missed daily at my wakening; for the loss of whom my bread has been as ashes, and the sight of no woman's face a pleasure. Hagar—for whom I have coined my sweat into gold, my sleep into gold, the blood in my veins and the flesh on my bones into gold under skies as hot as hell—God! to be home at last, and yet to tremble on the very edge of joy—the mother of my child. Oh, Hagar, so beautiful, so light of foot, so light of heart, so ready with your smile! You wife, who drove your husband forth and knows not if he be quick or dead! Yet these are woman's ways: and no man can fathom them. . . . She is not wed again and she spoke no word against me when the old dame gibed. . . ."

And the woman thinks:

"Lord, how he do glare! This must be indeed what folks call love at first sight. I would men were

not so hot of love. 'Tis discomposing. . . . I shall have red velvet cushions to my carriage, and a great mantle painted on it with little white tails and a crown over it just like the duchess's. And I shall have stones that glimmer like my Lady Tavistock's; and a turban on my head with a great feather; and I shall go driving, driving all through Tavistock and Ivybridge, and I shall order five pounds' worth of ribbon from Mr. Mallock, and give him a bow as he stands at the door. And little John shall have a blue satin hat with three white feathers. These Indian gentlemen are rich, so I have heard; indeed, he has a rich look. . . . We shall leave Aunt Deb in the farm, and build a house as grand as Endsleigh."

Then he speaks.

"And so, mistress, you have had a sad experience of wedded life, and you are now alone upon this farm, with your child—a boy, I think you said?"

"Aye, sir, a fine boy, healthy and strong, though to-night a little restless. He has eaten green apples on the sly and has the stomach-ache."

"And 'tis five years since you were left here alone?"

"'Tis not for want of offers to bear me company," says she, and tosses her head, and plays her shapely foot.

"Oh! that I can well believe," says he, "and I marvel that so fair a flower should still be left to bloom ungathered."

"I could not bring myself," she says, "to wed with any of the coarse farmers hereabouts. My father was much considered of the gentry, sir; and this homestead of mine has been freehold in our family for nigh two hundred years. I have had," she says

mincingly, "a very superior education, and I would rather remain alone than mate beneath me."

"I understand," says he, "that your husband was not of your class."

"Ah, no," she answers, with a flash of scorn, "but I was young, sir, and foolish." And to herself, "Oh, Lord, now he is jealous of poor lost runaway Jim."

"Ah!" says the stranger, and shifts his seat.

There is silence a while; and ashes fall with a ghost of sound into the grate.

"Those lilac trees outside," says the gentleman, "those must smell very sweet in the spring."

"Now," says she to herself, "how could he know they were lilacs?"

"In such a place, I fancy," he goes on, "on an April evening lovers might well exchange their first vows, and the scent of the flowers would mingle very fragrantly with the thrillings of first love. I can fancy," he says, "a man with his maid on such a spot, and how the heavens would open at their first kiss." And in his heart he cries: "Oh, Hagar, have you forgotten?"

But she answers coyly:

"All places, sir, are good for love; for love, so people say, makes all places good."

"Then," says he, and leans forward, and speaks hot and fast, "do you think that on a winter's night by a wood fire, a man might as easily speak of love as under yon bushes in spring?"

"La! sir," she says, "how can I tell?"

"May I speak to you of love to-night?" says this strange man. "I have been in heathen lands, and have not spoken to a woman of my race for five long years. Mistress Hagar, you are very beautiful in my

eyes; are you willing to listen to me?" He rises and comes over to her and kneels beside her, and takes her hand, his touch is cold and clammy as death. "Are you willing?" he says, with a sort of cry, "is your heart free? Could you love a stranger whom you have not known two hours?"

She lets her hand remain in his, and turns her head away.

"'Tis a little sudden," she says, and smooths her apron with her free hand. "And you speak oddly; but I am sure you mean honest, as you are a gentleman. Is it a wife you want?"

"Oh! aye," he says, with a great burst of harsh laughter. "Is it a wife I want! What else indeed?" And then: "You wear no ring, I see," says he, "but yet you must have loved that man who was your husband. I would not have a wife who loved another man, were he dead a thousand times and lying ten fathoms deep."

"Oh!" she says, pettishly, and snaps her hand out of his, "poor Jim! I was quite a child, sir. I knew not what it was to love. Oh, Lord!" she says and looks down, "none need be jealous of poor Jim, for God knows if I married in haste, I repented at leisure, as the old saw has it. And the thought of Jim is no more to me than that of the young dog that bit me in the yard last summer and that the men shot lest he might go mad. I have had my lesson."

The man has risen and stands facing her.

"Then if your heart is empty can you let me into it—me, a stranger?"

"'Tis not so empty," she replies, "since I saw you."

He catches her round the waist, her eyes are modestly dropped.

"Will you kiss me, Hagar?" says he, in her ear, and she feels his arms tremble around her.

She yields, turns her brown cheek slowly that he may reach her lips; then glances up, sees his face close bent to hers, and screams aloud.

"Yes," says he, and dashes hair off his forehead, and pulls the beard apart, and drags it back from his face. "Look at me, look at me, you woman!"

"Jim!" she shrieks, and clasps her hands and falls upon the settle.

"Aye, Jim," he says, "Jim, poo: Jim. Jim, who is no more to you than the dead dog that bit you and was shot. Jim, the father of your child. Devil!" he says, "whom I set in the shrine of my heart. Devil! you would have kissed me." He puts his hands on her shoulders, and then slips them round her throat. "Should such as you live?" he says.

She cannot call for help, she can hardly breathe; she feels his grasp tighten, and then from upstairs comes once again the loud wail of the restless boy.

"Oh, my God!" cries the father, flings the woman from him, dashes to the door, wrenches back the bars, and is out into the tempest.

Like one petrified, she sits and listens. Through the open door the snow comes whirling in upon the bitter blast. The smoke, the ashes, fly out into the room; and again in a little while she hears, across the storm voices, the dull thud-thud of a galloping horse flying away into the night.



THE LOVE-APPLE



VIII

THE LOVE-APPLE

WHEN Sir Adrian brought home his little French wife, people—those good people who are always so much occupied about their neighbours' morals—shook their heads solemnly and called this the worst and last of his follies. To marry a foreigner, and a Papist to boot: it was enough, they vowed, to make the bones of the noble Sir Nicholas and Dame Joan, of blessed memory, his virtuous parents—not to speak of the bones of all his other noble ancestors—turn in their granite tombs! They prophesied the ruin of the old house and the disgrace of the proud name within the shortest possible space of time. And, sure enough, the end of all the race was near at hand; but it came otherwise and from other causes than these wise gossips could foresee.

A slight and winsome thing was the new and last Lady Dale; with the clear olive skin of her native land, a head of nut-brown hair, which she seldom had the patience to have dressed and powdered as be seemed her rank and status, but which her doting husband liked to see crimping and curling over the childish brow and drooping into the dark eyes in all its native beauty. Just seventeen was she, and

babyish at that; little inclined to take up the responsibilities of her state of life, to act the serious housewife and preside over store-linen and cupboard, as all the dames of Lytton Manor before her had deemed it incumbent upon their honour to do. In and out of the old house she flitted, a mere butterfly of a being; dancing, laughing, singing, plucking the roses, not for the sake of distilling them into sweet scents or making cunning mixtures of potpourri wherewith to fill the great china vases of the withdrawing-rooms, but to wear them on her bosom for an hour or two, to stick them fantastically behind her ears; nay, sometimes for the wanton mischief of pelting her spaniel, or of shredding their leaves along the paths of the stiff gardens. And as she played with the flowers, even so did she play with the love that surrounded her (for there was something about this dainty piece of flesh and blood that gathered love in a strange fashion); she culled pleasures like roses, to smile at and flirt withal and toss away as the mood took her. But no one chid her; no one had the heart to chide her; and Sir Adrian was happy, there was no doubt of that. He saw no flaw in her. And he, who had led hitherto so wild and lawless a life, was now content to feed upon her baby smile and bask in the light of her innocent eyes; nay, it would seem he meant to settle down at last in his own home and take up in earnest the duties of his high position.

Towards the end of the first year there came a change over the little French dame. Miladi her foreign maid had called her during this damsel's brief sojourn in what she was pleased to designate "an insupportable country," and as Miladi she was soon

known far and wide. Her light foot grew heavier in its tread; she no longer cared for racing with her spaniel or playing elfish tricks upon her lord; there grew a thoughtfulness upon her April face. She took to lying on her sofa a good deal; and she, who, despite a thousand daily moods, had never shown but one sweet serenity of temper, waxed fretful, full of humours and odd fancies; had short tempests of tears, most strange to see; and, stranger still, long spells of gravity and silence.

But wise women nodded and winked; it was all as it should be, they said, and good days were coming to the old house; and it would be a fine thing when the nurseries were opened again; above all, as Sir Adrian was the last of his name.

So matters stood on the eve of the anniversary of their wedding-day.

An August evening it was, wearing beautifully to its roseate end, and Sir Adrian and his little "Miladi" sat on the terrace-walk in the last rays of the sun, she with her head on his breast, watching idly the peacocks as they strutted up and down; he watching her with that new tenderness that had come into his eyes of late instead of the fierce love-light of the earlier moons.

Miladi was thoughtful, and looking down at her suddenly her husband saw that she was pouting and frowning.

"Why, sweetheart," said he, "is aught amiss?"

"My love," quoth she, "I have been to-day most shamefully used—nay, never start so fiercely just when I am comfortable! Keep quiet, good Sir Hotspur, and I will tell you all about it. You know when you left me this afternoon for that stupid meet-

ing of magistrates you would go to (oh, pray tell me not your reasons all over again; they are very long and very tedious, and no good reasons at all when I wanted you to stay!)? Well, Mister my husband, the time was long upon my hands, and so I took Cécile with me, and we walked a long, long way; that is why I am so tired. (No, I am not imprudent; you know nothing about anything—walking is good for me.) We went through the wood, and I bade Daniel follow with the pony-carriage, so that I could get in and rest me if I cared to.

“And thus we came out of the wood and across a piece of dry heath, Dead Man’s Heath they call it, I am told, and round again by the Quarries and then to the left again, and there we saw a strange-looking cottage all by itself with a little garden, and a paling round it; and it was just like a fairy cottage in the lonely desolate world. Cécile and I went up to the gate and looked over; the garden was full of strange flowers and curious herbs; and up the paling on the right side, with the sun full upon it and great red fruit glowing and glistening, there climbed a plant of what we call in my land *tomates*. Cécile tells me you call it love-apple hereabouts, and the silly thing vows ’tis poison! Why, with us, we deem it truly wholesome eating, and the cooks at my father’s had many a savoury fashion of dishing it! Well, when I saw the dear red smooth things blinking at me in the sunshine, I tell you, sir, my mouth watered for them, and I said to Cécile: ‘Now I know what it is I have missed in my husband’s garden.’ And I bade her knock at the door of the house and tell them within that her lady would buy of their love-apples. Cécile was full of sore foreboding and tried to thwart

me, which I told her was but a fool's trick. And then, even as we spoke, the door opened and out came some kind of a strange wench. Thou callest me dark, my husband; thou shouldst have seen her Moorish face, her hair like the wings of some black bird hanging over her eyes, and those eyes—not black, in truth, but the colour of amber, fierce, much like thy hawks'! And round her head she had an orange scarf, just the colour of the fruit I wanted. Clinging to her skirts there was a small child, such a chubby, sturdy, sunburnt child, with a face so like the woman's that I knew it for her babe; and yet, unlike her, too, for it had blue, blue eyes; as blue as yours, Sir Adrian, and eyebrows, black already on that little infant brow, straight and nearly meeting—like, like, yes——”

As she spoke, Miladi whisked round and glanced up at her husband's face and cried with a crow of laughter, clapping her hands:

“I vow and declare, like yours: exactly like yours.”

Then she paused all aghast, for Sir Adrian gave a kind of groan, and his countenance was drawn and bleached as if with pain.

“Oh, what hast thou?” said she, her lip trembling into a piteous droop like a frightened child's.

Sir Adrian drew a deep breath, then he put out his arm and gathered his wife back into her nestling-place.

“'Tis but an old wound that woke and hurt me,” said he.

“Did I press against the old wound, my Adrian?” asked Miladi, with a tear brimming in each eye.

“Yes, my little wife,” replied he, very tenderly, and then all at once he closed his other arm upon

her and kissed her two or three times, passionately as if he would kiss her soul away.

There fell a silence between them : the sun dipped behind the rolling hill glades and all the yellow shafts were swallowed up in uniform shadowless twilight the little rabbits began to skip out among the bracken in the park beyond. Presently Miladi spoke again in a tone of gentle complaint :

"I have not finished my story, Adrian. Do you not want to know what happened to me and how it came that I was so badly used?"

Sir Adrian moved uneasily, as if that old wound had not yet ceased paining, and his face looked dark and stern ; but Lady Dale, who liked the sound of her own voice, babbled on unheeding :

"Well, sir, you should have seen how that rude woman stared ; stared me up and down, in so strange a way that I felt insulted by her very look. Only for the tomatoes upon the wall, I would have turned myself away and left her at once ; but they shone more luscious bright than any fruit I have ever seen, and eat them I felt I must ! It is not that I am greedy, my husband—quite otherwise, indeed—but there are things I can't explain ! So I went up to the gate and drew my purse and said : 'My good woman, will you sell me your love-apples?' And she said to me : 'No, I will not. I want all my love-apples for myself. You fine ladies,' said she, very rude, 'you would take everything from the poor, love and apples and everything else!' Was it not strange of her? I was frightened, I thought she was mad ; and Cécile kept pulling by the sleeve with, 'Come away, Miladi,' and 'Come away, Miladi.' Nevertheless I held up a gold piece, for I did want my toma-

toes, but when she saw the gold the woman went altogether furious—like a savage! And she screamed: 'Keep your gold, Lady Dale, keep all you can, for what was mine and is mine you can never have.' Just like that she screamed it. And then she flounced about and caught up the child who was staring at me with his round blue eyes, sucking his little thumb. 'And isn't he a beauty?' says she, 'and don't you wish yours may be like him? Before he was born,' she said, 'I had my fill of all that I craved for, but you may go wanting,' and so turned into her cottage and slammed the door. But Cécile and I we ran away, and then I heard her voice calling after us, mocking: 'Send your husband for the love-apples an you need them so badly; maybe I'll give them to him!'—Oh, Adrian!"

Sir Adrian, with the veins in his brow swelling like whip-cord and his teeth grinding, had sworn a heavy oath.

"Hark you, Elizabeth," cried he, and then sharply caught her by the wrist, "I forbid you ever to go near that place again. Do you hear me?"

"But some one must get me the love-apples," faltered she.

"Pshaw!" said Sir Adrian, and rose and fell to pacing the green sward stormily.

But Lady Dale began to weep—Sir Adrian was very unkind.

At sight of her tears all the anger melted from his looks. Lovingly he came to her again.

"And are not there enough fruits in our paradise for you, my little Eve, that you must hanker after the forbidden? You should eat my heart if you had a fancy for it."

"But I have no fancy to eat your heart, sir; that is very horrid! I have a fancy for the tomatoes. The woman said she had had her fill of all she wanted before her boy was born; and shall our son be less beautiful?"

"My darling, I will send to-night to the town and for love or money you shall have your fruit to-morrow."

"I do not want the town tomatoes," sobbed Miladi. "I want those—those red, ripe, shining ones on the woman's wall. Will you not send there? She said she would give them to you."

"Elizabeth," said her lord, "I will hear no more. That is a dangerous and an evil woman, and from my home none may have communication with her. Such is my wish. Oh, my little heart, do not cry!"

And his lips went close to her ear and he spoke many words into it with many kisses, so sweet and so tender, that the little wife could not but smile at length and go to bed comforted.

Now, she slept at first peacefully, with the smile still on her fair mouth that his good-night kiss had summoned there; but at dawn she dreamed that some one brought her the love-apples on a silver dish, and that they shone red-gold as no jewel ever shone. With this dream she awoke. A faint light was just stealing in between the shutters; and Miladi lay awake, and tossed and turned and could not rest for the thought of the forbidden fruit, and how they must be showing round out of the darkness as the dawn spread, and how the first shaft of light would strike them and flash back from their polished cheeks; and the craving grew and grew within her till she could bear it no longer.

She sat up in bed and looked at Sir Adrian's sleeping face, and her heart smote her that she should disobey him.

"But men do not understand," she said to herself. "I know it is a very bad thing to refuse oneself a desire at such a time. If I want those love-apples, it is not for myself but because of the child; and if I do not get them, God knows what may happen to the poor little heir! It is indeed clearly my duty."

So she crept out of bed, and pattered out of the room down the passage to wake Cécile. And sorely against the poor woman's wish she was bidden to rise from her billowy feather-bed and dress her mistress first and then herself, and come across the fields to fetch the love-apples.

"But they be poison!" gasped Cécile, in the midst of an arrested yawn.

"*Patati patata!*" cried my lady; "up with you, you lazy thing!"

All out in the pure gleaming dawn went they, shivering in the chill, and on through the dew-wet meadow-grass they pressed hurriedly, for the way seemed long before them.

"If the woman be within her house," said Miladi, "or be still asleep, which is like enough—the English are such lie-abeds—then, Cécile, must thou enter quite softly, quite softly, the little garden and pluck for me the three best fruit. And thou shalt lay this gold piece on the threshold of the cottage, so that it will be no theft but a good earning for that cross woman. And then I shall eat the love-apples even before I come home."

She licked her lips like a little cat; but buxom

Cécile thumped her bosom with inarticulate groaning protest.

The sun was quite up above the horizon, swimming in a sea of liquid light, when they reached Dead Man's Heath, and the little cottage shone upon them dazzling white. Miladi broke into a run and then halted, gasping for breath.

"A plague upon this weary body of mine that is so heavy to carry," quoth she; and then caught herself up with, "God forgive me! I did not mean that, Cécile, give me thy arm; I am very tired, but this is our goal, the heavens be praised!"

So, stumbling, they reached the small garden gate and then Miladi called out loudly in astonishment and joy. For the cottage was empty, with wide-open doors and windows; but just in the gaping threshold stood a stool, and on it was placed a white plate that gleamed like silver in the sunrays, and on the plate lay three tomatoes. Now, as Miladi drew closer, she saw that, in the hollow between the three, a piece of paper had been thrust, upon which there were written these words: "*For Lady Dale.*"

"Oh, the kind, kind woman!" cried Lady Dale. "she knew I would come back!"

She took the fruit, placed them tenderly in a fold of her dress, and dropped the gold piece into the empty plate.

"I suppose she is out at work already," she said. "come, Cécile, let us go home. I will eat on the way."

"Oh, my lady, don't touch the nasty things!" cried silly Cécile, whimpering.

For all answer Lady Dale chose out the roundest of the three and drove her teeth into the pulpy flesh so that the juice spurted out.

"Delicious!" she said, and in four mouthfuls it was gone.

But she did not attempt to eat the rest, and it was in silence that she trudged the woody paths towards the house.

At the postern gate, which they had left ajar for their secret return, she paused and threw the other fruit pettishly into the hollyhock bed.

"I will eat no more; they have a strange taste," she said faintly.

She felt weary and spent as she dragged herself up the stairs, undressed in a great hurry in Cécile's room, where she had dressed herself, and slid back again to bed as noiselessly as she had left it.

Sir Adrian had never stirred.

The clock struck five as she pulled the bedclothes over her. Lady Dale shivered. "I wish I had not eaten of that fruit," she said, and laid her throbbing head on the pillow; her tongue was parched and dry, and there seemed a kind of burning heat within her.

"I wonder if I am going to be ill?" thought she.

* * * * *

In another hour there was terror and commotion at Lytton Manor. Its little mistress had been seized with deadly and mysterious sickness.

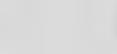
"Oh, mercy on us, my lady is poisoned!" cried poor Cécile. "And it was them love-apples as sure as fate."

At the word poison Sir Adrian grew livid white, and when weeping Cécile had told her tale, he was like one distracted, and sent upon every side to summon the best doctors in the three counties.



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But when they met at the bedside, Lady Dale knew not anything or anybody any more; and before the sun had set the bells were all tolling, and the housekeeper, the tears stealing down her withered cheeks, was going from room to room, pulling down all the blinds.

Upstairs the doctors had another patient, and feared for Sir Adrian's reason.

Upon the outskirts of the park the whole of that dreadful day a woman lurked and watched the house. She had an orange kerchief tied around her curly black hair and bore a child upon her shoulders, a little sturdy lad, whose eyes were blue, beneath straight, dark brows, even as Sir Adrian's own.

When the woman heard the bells begin to toll and saw the flag lowered on the turret, she suddenly began to laugh out loud, and whipping the child from her back, clutched him so fiercely to her breast that he set up a loud wail of fear.

Then she took to her heels and fled, through fields and bypaths, towards the high road.

Far into the night the doctors discussed the nature of the poison that they thought to trace in the two love-apples, which had been duly searched for and extracted from the hollyhock bed.

They never agreed upon this point; but that it was a very deadly poison and very cunningly inserted into the fruit, they unanimously declared. Now as Lady Dale lay stiff and stark upon the great bed, and as in each fruit there was found a tiny punctured hole near the stalk, it did not require an immense amount of science to arrive at these conclusions.

And so within the week they laid all the love of

man's life and all the hope of a noble house in one little grave. And though, when Sir Adrian came to himself, he had the land scoured from end to end, no trace was ever found in town or country of the dark woman and her blue-eyed boy.



THE MIRROR OF THE
FAITHFUL HEART



IX

THE MIRROR OF THE FAITHFUL HEART

HAIL, rain, or snow, Sir Peter Coverdale waited upon Lady Barbara Ogle precisely at four o'clock of the afternoon every weekday, partook of a dish of tea, and joined her in a game of tric-trac. On the stroke of half-past five the grey mare was led round under the portico and Sir Peter jogged gently back to his solitary home. Each Sunday he made his appearance at Ogle Hall an hour earlier; but the grey mare had her Sabbath rest, and a more ancient quadruped his weekly outing to convey Sir Peter to the repast which Lady Barbara dispensed with stately amiability to himself, the parson and his lady.

Every quarter-day he went over in state to pay her the rent of certain woods, hired for his coverts (for tradition's sake merely; Sir Peter, over and above all things scholar and dilettante, cared little for shooting and less for the chase), attired as became the seasons, and bringing the offering of an appropriate posy. Sir Peter would then propose marriage to Lady Barbara, who had been for ten years the object of his declared affections, and for ten previous that of his secret ardours. Every quarter-day Lady Barbara was overcome by surprise, shed a few tears, scolded a

little, smiled a little, gave him a determined refusal, and her hand to kiss.

*When last I died (and, dear, I die
As often as from thee I go),*

*I can remember yet that I
Something did say, and something did bestow.*

The singing words of old Donne might have been penned to fit the case.

They parted better friends than ever. But if the gentleman rode home at a slow pace, his fine head sunk sadly on his breast, it might be observed that the lady, on the other hand, went about the house all the evening even more briskly than ever, that she sniffed complacently at a posy in her kitchen, and was unwontedly lenient to the maids.

Lady Barbara was a widow. Squire Ogle had left her no childrer, but a comfortable estate, which she managed with prudence, energy, and enjoyment.

Lady Barbara was fair; she was—plump; she was—quite thirty-nine. Sir Peter's name was very old, so was his house. He was lean and melancholy. He was fond of the poets, and indeed of all his libraries (which smelt good of old leathers, was brown and dimly flecked with gold, with an air of russet antiquity and dignity, and which he unconsciously matched very well in his brown suit and dim gilt buttons). His estate touched the Ogle boundaries. He had sufficient competence to feel that with proper price he might aspire to the hand of his rich and fashionable neighbour. He was a bachelor, and he had loved but her.

Upon a certain Michaelmas Sir Peter might have been seen ambulating his neglected garden in search of the quarterly posy. His russet suit had been carefully brushed; his ample locks, all silvered already though they were, had been on the contrary most handsomely powdered. His heart fluttered as he picked his nosegay: autumn blossoms, as fragrant yet and tender, if with as little hold on life, as his own delicate passion.

There was a bloom as of the purple on the grape, as of the gold on the apple, over the land as he rode along the familiar road. The mild air was full of the tart savour of the fading leaf, the sweetness of the hoarded stack. The yellow sunlight lay very gently upon the world.

He found Lady Barbara on the garden terrace; 'twas her favourite seat in fitting weather. But even before he had had time to make his first bow, before he could lift his hand to offer the posy—and this demanded an exquisite flourish, for it should indicate his heart before reaching her taper fingers—he perceived that something unusual had happened. Lady Barbara was flustered. There was a wonderful grandeur of silk and brocade about her, of fine goffered muslin and delicate lace.

For one unreasonable instant his old heart gave a leap. Was this Michaelmas Day to be the day of all days to him at last? But the next moment he told himself with sorry humour that he was but the appropriate goose. His uplifted hand fell stiffly by his side. Alas! Elderly lover though he was, he had all the intuitions of the devoted heart. Not he had anything to say to the unwonted flowering of his beloved's attire, to the unwonted rose upon her fine,

smooth cheek. She had no thought for him to-day, nay, he was not even sure that he was welcome.

"La!" she cried. "Sir Peter! (Where lags the wench with the tay?) A fine afternoon, Sir Peter. I fear you must excuse me from our game to-day. I am expecting a visitor."

Expecting a visitor! Not have their tric-trac! Such untoward occurrences had interrupted their existences but once these ten years, when Lady Barbara had had the influenza.

Sir Peter slipped the nosegay to his left hand while he pulled a little bag from his waistcoat pocket with the right. It was his pleasure to present his debt to the lady every quarter in the form of gold pieces enclosed in a charming little reticule of coloured taffeta, constructed for him by his housekeeper and tied with gold thread. These dainty receptacles, after being duly emptied of their prosaic contents, Lady Barbara was given to fill with lavender and to dispose about her cupboards and presses. There were not yet enough for every drawer, and perhaps that was the reason she still refused Sir Peter.

Usually he took a poetic pleasure in the discharging of his obligation; but this afternoon the flurry of her air in which he had no share, the elegance that put him at such a distance, troubled him. He drew forth the little bag and held it out without a word. 'Twas of purple silk, embroidered in silver roses. It had appeared to him vastly tasteful but an hour ago.

"What's that?" she cried, looking at it as it lay in the pale hollow of his trembling old hand.

"My debt," said he gravely; he that had gener-

ally so apt a quotation to lead up to his own most poetic declaration.

"What!" cried she sharply. "'Tis never Quarter Day. If I had not clean forgotten!"

"The fact is, Sir Peter, I have been quite upset—I vow the wenches have forgotten the tay; but they are prodigious busy. 'Twas quite unexpected. You must want your cup."

"Nay," said he, "never mind the tay."

She accepted his suggestion without seeming to hear it, after the fashion of housekeepers who do not wish to press their servants.

"I received a despatch from my cousin Damory this morning. Pray, have you heard me mention my cousin, the Lord Earl of Damory? He proposes to lie the night at Ogle Hall. He will perchance stay longer. I know not.—We have not met," she said, playing with the little purple bag in a manner that showed how far away her thoughts were, for she was a woman careful over money, "we have not met for I know not how many years."

She looked down and a tremulous blushing emotion transfigured her comely face as the autumn will, now and again, wear an air of spring.

"I see it all," said Sir Peter, and groped blindly for his hat where he had set it on the balustrade. "You—you once loved each other."

"He remembers me still, it seems," faltered the lady. "It was long, long ago; before even I met my poor Ogle, but there are things the heart cannot forget."

"I understand," said Sir Peter, and clapped his three-cornered hat over his own poor heart.

"We went our ways," pursued Lady Barbara, com-

placent in her reminiscences. "I fear he has led a sad, wild life since he, too, was widowed. But—his letter is vastly flattering—he writes with great feeling." The lady turned coy. "I could read you a phrase or two."

She dived with two white fingers under her capacious kerchief. The letter was in her bosom. There are things flesh and blood cannot bear, be turned of sixty.

"Madam," said Sir Peter, bowing low, "you are busy. I will intrude no longer."

He turned and left her, and she raised no sound to call him back.

Thus did it come about that on that Michaelmas Day Sir Peter Coverdale neither proposed for the Lady Barbara nor presented his love token.

The following day Sir Peter was fully determined not to ride over to Ogle Hall. He lingered unwontedly over his dinner, though he had but a poor appetite; and when the time drew near for departing sat himself down before the fire in his library and opened a volume of Jeremy Taylor as if he meant not to budge for a month. But he had artfully remembered to forget to counter-order the mare; and when she came with stiff prancings to the door (for it was a frosty and exhilarating afternoon) it seemed unreasonable that he should not at least take a turn in the park.

After this no one will be surprised to hear that it was but shortly after the usual hour that he trotted under the granite portico of Lady Barbara's house with its spreading shell canopy and fluted pilasters.

He was gathering himself together with a very solemn countenance before dismounting, when the door was flung open and one of the apple-faced footmen ran out.

"My lady bid me watch for you, Sir Peter," said he with a grin of cordial welcome. A very trim little maid seized hold of the gentleman in the hall.

"Her ladyship is in the blue parlour," quoth she, and tripped before him to the door.

"Bodes not this cheerful bustle ill for me?" thought Sir Peter. He looked round darkly as he entered, but her ladyship was alone. A tea-tray of very agreeable brilliance was laid before the fire. The urn was hissing.

"One minute," said Lady Barbara, uplifting a taper finger to arrest him; and thereupon she poured the bubbling water into the melon-shaped teapot, and the whole air was filled with fragrance.

"You must want your Bohea this cold day," said Lady Barbara sweetly.

She came forward to greet him, and he saw behind her the tric-trac board temptingly displayed between two armchairs.

"She is a true woman," said the dejected swain to himself. "She thinks by these things to soften the blow!" He looked at her long and tenderly as he took her hand. She was changed again since yesterday. Where was the youthful exuberance of curls, and the little fly-away pink bow that had sat so coquettishly in the midst of them? Where was the rose-flowered brocade; where the velvet bands and the diamond buckles, the swelling magnificence of paniers, the rich torsades of lace?

"Her incomparable heart mourns over my grief,"

he reflected, gently shaking his powdered head; then to the fell presentiment of his forthcoming loss of her he broke into some lines from his favourite Donne:

*If yet I have not all thy love,
Dear, I shall never have it all;
I cannot breathe one other sigh to move,
Nor can entreat one other sigh to fall.*

"'Tis a vastly pretty rhyme," said she, "but, Sir Peter, your Bohea will be past drinking."

"Your visitor?" he queried; and cup and saucer rattled in his hand as he took it from her.

"Oh," she said airily. "My lord Damory, mean you? He came but for the night, you know. He's on his way to Bristol Hot-wells.—Is your tay agreeable, Sir Peter?"

"Your ladyship hinted he might remain."

"He did not remain," said Lady Barbara firmly.

She sat down with some abruptness in her arm-chair, and looked with steady eye past the tremulous, eager figure of her elderly lover out of the window.

"He did not remain," she said.

Sir Peter could hardly draw a breath, so uncertain was he whether it should be one of rapture or agony.

"Sit down," said Lady Barbara sharply, "and drink your cup, man."

Then, with a sudden change of mood, her bright, handsome face softening in a very womanly way, she leant over to him and laid her fingers on his wrist.

"Sir Peter," she said, "my kind friend, I have been an old fool."

Sir Peter was so startled that he well-nigh dropped the delicate china. His lean frame shook violently

as he first laid the cup carefully out of his reach and then turned his wrinkled countenance, grey with emotion, upon Lady Barbara. Had other lips but hers spoken such blasphemy . . . !

"Yes," said she, nodding, "an old fool. Here have I been years and years dreaming about Cousin Damory and the time when we were young folks together, forgetting that as the years and the years go by, other things go by too."

"Other things, my most honoured friend?"

"Aye, Sir Peter! Youth and looks, man! Looks, beauty, charm!"

He gave a groan of utter repudiation and horror; and she laughed. A comfortable, hearty laugh was hers, even though it held just then a little quaver in it as of tears.

"I deny it," said Sir Peter, so exceedingly agitated that the powder flew in scented mists about his head.

"I deny it, absolutely and totally."

"Alack! I've looked in the mirror, my good sir," said the lady; and she winked sternly as she spoke, for there was a moisture in her blue eyes which she was determined they should not shed. "Cousin Damory was obliging enough to hold the mirror for me last night. And I looked in . . . and I saw what I was."

"Your cousin Damory, ma'am!" he ejaculated, and rose jerkily to his feet. "Lady Barbara, I have no hesitation in saying it, with all due respect to your ladyship's family, that man is a villain."

"You saw how I prinked myself out for him last night. Mally and I and the maids thought I made a vastly fine show. 'Twas my birthday brocade, and had been thought to become me." She cast a somewhat wistful glance at him.

"You were—you were adorable!" said he.

"Cousin Damory," she began again, "Cousin Damory, my excellent friend, has, it seems, an empty exchequer. He was good enough to remember some early passages of tenderness between us, with the view of replenishing the said exchequer from the good estates of Ogle Hall.—Unfortunately, Cousin Damory also found my wine vastly to his liking . . . and you learned gentlemen have a proverb, I believe in the Latin, '*In vino veritas.*'"

Sir Peter could not speak. He was hanging on her words as if each of them were as the breath of life to him. His quivering hands hovered in the air.

"Well," said the lady, "'twas well enough at first. But, O Sir Peter, how is my poor cousin changed! Heavens! how coarse hath he grown; how red in the face, how bulky in the figure!"

The old scholar's innocent grey eyes swept his own attenuated limbs with quick complacency, and for the first time since the yesternoon he smiled.

"'Twas but now and again that by a look, a gesture, I could trace the handsome youth I had loved."

Sir Peter's smile faded.

"All went well enough at supper. My lord was good enough to praise the provender. But when I retired, leaving him with the young man, his secretary, who travels with him, it was then, O Sir Peter, that my eyes were opened!"

"Then?" echoed Sir Peter breathlessly.

"Then," said Lady Barbara. "Hearing that two or three more bottles of wine had been sent for in succession, and that my lord's voice was waxing very loud, I—I——" she hesitated, and lifting the

hem of her purple-and-black-flowered apron, pleated it between her white fingers.

"You—you overheard?" faltered Sir Peter.

The lady dropped her apron, smoothed it firmly over her knee, and looked up at the anxious face that was bent over her.

"Sir Peter," she said, "I listened. And a very fortunate thing it was, too," she proceeded briskly. "For, if it hurt my pride, it saved my pocket. And something else, too: my self-respect. . . . 'What d'ye think of my coz?' Lord Damory says, bawling to his young man. 'Ye'd never believe, Jenkins, that that old woman was once the prettiest girl in Hampshire!'"

"Oh! oh!" cried Sir Peter, as if in pain. "The drunken ruffian, madam, knew not what he said."

"Nay," she made answer. "The wine but loosed his tongue. Not indeed that I am one who would cast shame to a gentleman for an extra bottle of an evening. 'Tis gentlemen's way, I know," said the widow, with a sigh of leniency to the convivial ghost of the departed squire. "But Cousin Damory was a trifle indiscreet in his cups, as you will hear. 'I remember her,' he shouts, 'as slender as a willow wand. I could compass her waist with my hand' (we were cousins, you must mind, Sir Peter). 'Lord!' says he, 'she's run to fat' (excuse that I should repeat his coarseness). 'I'll have to take both arms to her,' he says."

Sir Peter Coverdale clasped his hands and wrung them in the extremity of his emotion.

"Oh!" cried he. "Oh! madam, how is it possible that any one could be so brutish, so afflicted by Heaven with crass stupidity, to behold without awe

and admiration those noble, those majestic, those goddess-like proportions, before which the immature charms of girlhood, however beautiful," he laid his hand upon his heart and bowed, as if to some sweet vision of Lady Barbara's youth, "must sink into utter insignificance, as the lesser nymphs before Juno herself."

"Why, why!" laughed the lady, and her laughter rang without any hint of tears this time, "only that my vanity was so well disposed of last night. Sir Peter, I vow you'd make me vain! But had you said to this: 'Did you see her double chin?' asked his lordship, 'and, plump as she is, the wrinkles about her eyes? But, Gad, she wags her curls and ogle me one as if she were half her age. The widow Ogle says he, 'tis a proper name!'"

"Tell me no more," ejaculated Sir Peter, lifting up both his hands sternly; his fine old face was flushed to his powdered hair. "It—it distresses me, ma'am—I—I can't bear it. Wrinkles! Dare the sacrilegious miscreant so allude to those lines which kindly mirth and tender sympathy for others have writ around your beautiful orbs? If I could describe to you, Lady Barbara, how infinitely I consider they increase the charm of your countenance, I fear you might chide me for offending that exquisite modesty which, like a veil of gossamer, softens but cannot conceal the brightness of your other virtues."

Lady Barbara smiled; but, by reason no doubt of the modesty she was applauded by her adorer, proceeded as if she had not heard:

"'But she's rich,' his lordship was good enough to add. 'So, Jenkins, we'll swallow her, fat and all, and she'll do better than a young one, for

I'll not have to stay at home and keep the sparks away.'"

Slowly, for elasticity of action had long departed from him, and he was much shaken by emotion, Sir Peter went down upon his knees before Lady Barbara.

"Most beloved and more lovely lady," said he, "yonder depraved and besotted idiot held no mirror at all for your gaze, but rather the stagnant pool of his own evil soul, into which your divine eyes should never have looked. Look now into the mirror of my faithful heart and behold yourself, yourself in beauty, which age cannot touch, which my poor words can never express.

*"By Love's religion, I must here confess it,
The most I love when I the least express it,"*

quoted Sir Peter from his favourite poet.

"Oh! Sir Peter, Sir Peter," said the lady, laughing and crying together, and holding out both her hands. Sir Peter took them, hardly daring to believe the fact, into his.

"Cousin Damory offered me his coronet this morning," said Lady Barbara, with apparent irrelevance, after a pause. "And thereafter, I fear, he departed somewhat hurriedly."

Sir Peter could not speak, but he kissed the white hands, one after another.

"Have you any objection to my lips, Sir Peter?" said Lady Barbara.

She was a downright dame; and, young as she was still fain to believe herself, with Sir Peter she could afford to waste no more time on shilly-shally.



THE YELLOW SLIPPER



X

THE YELLOW SLIPPER

I N the middle of the last century there was born a little Franconian Princess, who, as she grew up, was always laughing. Even when other babies cried, she had laughed; had cut her teeth with crows of joy over the coral; had danced in the sunbeams before she could articulate—*Glückskind*, her nurse had called her.

She lived in the dull old Court of the dull little State of Ansbach-Grünberg; for those were days when the Empire was still a patchwork of Duchies and Principalities, great and small—mostly small. Her father was Margrave of Ansbach.

Both he and the Margravine were advanced in life when they married, and this was the only child. Consequently, the little Princess had no companions of her own standing, and few of any other; for neither her mother nor her governess approved of any familiarity with those beneath her in station. Her life was regulated like the clocks in the *Residenz*. A prisoner, it seemed, would have had more chance of indulging in harmless amusements than had the Princess Charlotte Ottilie Isabella. And yet, as she grew from a baby to a child, from a child to a maiden, and reaching the ripe age of seventeen years,

the little Princess, girded in as she was, kept her merry heart. Her governesses thought it quite indecorous; most deplorable. But the Special Envoy of His Most Christian Majesty, Louis XV., the Well-Beloved (who had stopped almost a whole week at the *Residens*, had proclaimed her the real sunshine of the Court: *la jolie Princesse Rit-Toujours*, he had been heard to call her. At this dull little Court French was, of course, the only tongue of "good tone," even as everywhere else on the Old Continent, and thus *Rit-Toujours* became the loving name of the little Princess among the many, old and young, who loved her—that is, when they were not actually stifled by courtlike formality.

The Margravine, however, long-faced and dismal, never responded but by a sign to the frankest peep of the girl's laughter. As for the Margrave, a pompous and yet strangely fussy man, the responsibilities of his army (of his hundred and seventy-one men and twenty-one drummer-boys), of his Privy Council of eight distinguished Ansbach-Grünbergers, of his ninety-two and a half miles of frontier, of his dollhouse Ministry, were matters which left him but little leisure for mere family concerns. Thus the Princess's life ran its course with that daily level of dulness well mentioned before; it was indeed a merciful dispensation that she was able to take her joyousness from within.

In the winter, the solemn, dreary old palace in the solemn, dreary little town. In the hot weather, the sleepy *Sommer Schloss*, seven miles out. In the autumn, the occasional visit to the hunting lodge in the mountainous district at the farthest limits of the realm, quite thirty miles away. And so the year

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went round again to winter and the town. Yet through it all, as I have said, the little Princess knew not a sad hour; nothing could rob her of her light heart, her bubbling sense of fun, her young joy in her young life.

Of all the months of the year, that of the visit to the hunting lodge was the most satisfying to her cheerful soul. There they went in smaller state; the rigid rules of etiquette were relaxed. The little Princess had actually been known to snatch unrebuked an hour or two of absolute liberty in the woods. And then there were the woods themselves—the wide, beautiful, free woods, with the wind always murmuring in the tree tops, and the brooks chattering down the stones, and new, unexplored mysteries of green glades at every turn; with the smell of the autumn leaves, the hidden, fascinating life of myriad feathered and furred things. It seemed as if the little Princess took away with her, from this all too brief sojourn in the heart of Nature, a provision of content and sweet memories for the other eleven months.

Now, the year when Charlotte Ottilie Isabella—these were the first three of the little Princess' many names--reached the age of seventeen was one fraught with very deep importance. First of all, after her seventeenth birthday she was pronounced emancipated from schoolroom control, and her governesses were discharged with a handsome pension. A lady-in-waiting was appointed to her, who, although she seemed very ancient in the little Princess' eye, was, nevertheless, the youngest person about the Court except herself, and who had not such iron notions of the rules of life for Princesses as the deposed au-

thority. Next, just before the emigration from summer residence to the woods and mountains, little Princess had been conscious of a certain st the stagnant atmosphere. She was promoted to s and satins, immense powdered erections on her h and certain elaborate family jewels. And the rum grew and spread that, now she was of marriagea age, the Margrave and Margravine were endeavou to secure a suitable alliance for her.

The Princess did not trouble her head very m about the matter, but it amused her, even as the r frocks amused her, the high-heeled shoes that w click-click, and the delightful feeling of being able order about instead of being ordered about.

"Toggenburg, get me some blue silk. Toggenbu play me that minuet of Scarlatti. Toggenburg, or coffee."

And good, lank, pale-eyed, pale-haired Madem selle de Toggenburg, the new lady-in-waiting, wo drop her invariable curtsy and flutter to obey w an alacrity at which the little Princess laughed she cried.

So it was in this quite unwonted twitter of exci ment that she went with the Margravian family Schloss Tannenfels that autumn. And here it w that the strange things we are about to narra happened to her.

The very first morning, when the Princess awol from the heavy sleep which had followed on t fatigues of the journey, she looked out from und the great billowing blue silk eiderdown to see a ros faced woman, with plaits of corn-coloured hair wou around and around her head, on her knees before th china stove, stuffing sticks into its capacious interio

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Now, this woman was strange to the Princess; so Ottilie sat up in bed, propped her head upon her hand (that little head that ought to have been a mass of sunshiny curls, and yet was so rigidly powdered and plastered day by day!) and said, smiling:

"What has become of old Gretel?"

Old Gretel was she who had been used to light the Princess' fire in the previous autumns.

The woman sprang from her knees with a half-frightened start and looked at the Princess' little pink face, smiling out of the bed at her; but reassured by the cherubic innocence of this exalted person's appearance, she dropped a rustic curtsey, and her own comely, ruddy countenance beaming back good will, answered in broad, peasant-lingo:

"Gretel, may it please the Miss Princesskin, Gretel has the rheumatics so bad in her poor old bones that she can come no longer to the castle. And so the most gracious gentleman, the steward, has engaged me for the work during the Princesses' visit. My grandmother stays at home and I rise with the little house and minds the cooking, and I rise with the dawn and come every morning from the forest hither. Before that I used to mind the cooking for her—that is, when she worked here—for Gretel is my grandmother, may it please the Princesskin."

The fire roared and crackled up the stovepipe.

"Pull back the curtains," said the little Princess, "and open the windows, that I may smell the trees."

It was a brilliant, sunshiny day, and the smell of the pine trees was glorious, so the little Princess thought, as she sat up in bed and sniffed and sniffed as if she could never sniff enough. The good-natured

peasant woman, with her hands planted akimbo on her sturdy hips, burst out laughing :

"Na, Miss Princess," she said, "that is something like, is it not?"

The little Princess laughed in concert. Nobody ever spoke to her like that before. It was delightful. And what ropes of hair the woman had about her head, and what a nice, hard, red cheek! It looked as fresh and as healthy as the mountain itself. In the coarse white kerchief which was folded across her bosom there was fastened a bunch of violets. Half hidden they were, but yet the Princess saw them and thought it was just what had been wanted to complete her pleasure. She knew it was not at all etiquette for a servant to sport such an adornment.

"From where hast thou the violets?" said she.

The woman blushed and smiled a singular smile, and hid them away in her bosom.

"Ach! from der Josef," she said, and shutting the stove door, she dropped her curtsey and pattered out of the room. As she went the little Princess noticed that she held her hand over the kerchief where the violets lay, as if she kept something precious there that she loved. And the laughter died away upon Charlotte Ottilie Isabella's lips, and she began to wonder who was der Josef. And why did the woman look like that? And what did that smile mean?

She had never seen anything so strange before, and wondering, she forgot to laugh.

A little later, however, she had good cause for merriment. A courier came to the castle that morning. Post-haste he had ridden from the capital all through the night. There was great agitation at his arrival; and the Margrave, who had been going out

hunting, put off the chase, so that the Princess knew that most important, indeed, must be the news that was brought.

In the afternoon she was summoned, with extreme formality, to the Margravine's private room. There she found her father and mother alone; on the table between them lay a great document with red seals and several other papers. Her mother's long, solemn face was flushed. Her father was hopping from leg to leg, mopping his forehead, though the day was not over-warm; his eyes looked more protruding than ever as he rolled them at her over his heavy, gold-rimmed spectacles.

"Come hither, my dear, come hither," said he. "You are growing a big girl, aye, aye. I suppose you are quite aware that it is time to be looking out for a husband, hey?" He pinched her cheek; he was in high good humour.

The little Princess began to laugh, the idea was so comical.

"Oh, dear," sighed the Margravine, "how can Your Highness speak to her like that? The child has been far too well brought up ever to think of such a thing."

And then the Princess laughed again. As if the word "husband" had not been echoing in the air for the last three months!

"Well, tell her yourself," said the Margrave. "It is the mother's business, after all."

"Oh, dear!" sighed the Margravine, "a mother's responsibilities are always great, but never so great as in a person of my position. Come and sit by me, Charlotte Ottilie Isabella. You are aware that it has ever been your father's and my desire to provide for your

welfare and happiness. The time has now arrived said the Margravine, "when it becomes our duty to think of selecting a suitable consort for you. A consort, my dear."

"The fact is," interrupted the Margrave impetuously, "we have had a most unexpected offer for your hand; most unexpected and most gratifying, aye, aye." He pinched her cheek again. "Who would have thought that this chit was destined to be a reigning Princess?" Here he drew back a step, puffed out his cheeks, blew very hard and wagged his head till his ribboned pigtail stood on end. "A reigning Princess, hey! That is something! What do you say to that, Princesskin?"

"A most magnificent alliance," the Margravine went trickling on; "and one, child, which we, the Margrave your father and myself, have no doubt will ensure the life's happiness of our very dear daughter. It is a great satisfaction to feel that your education has been so carefully attended to, that you are fit for the highest station."

"A reigning Princess!" said the girl, jumping to her feet.

She had only seen a reigning Princess once and that was a very fat, snuffy, ugly old lady, the Margravine's maternal aunt—the late Queen of Poland. But somehow the word conjured up thoughts of gold crowns and marble palaces and a splendid court; and also a shifty, blurred, and yet glorious vision of a handsome young Prince, with a crown on his head and a red velvet cloak lined with ermine, who held her hand and looked into her eyes.

"The reigning Duke of Lausitz," said the Margrave pompously, "has done us the honour of suing

for your hand." As he spoke, he produced from amid the papers on the table a miniature case of very fine gold and enamel.

"His Serene Highness the Duke of Lausitz," said the Margravine, rolling the words in her plaintive voice as if she liked the sound of them, "is most greatly and most justly esteemed, not only by his own devoted subjects, but by all the potentates of the world. He is reported to be one of the richest sovereigns of the Empire. We can the better trust our beloved daughter into his keeping that he has passed the first giddiness of youth. The late Duchess of Lausitz, his lamented first spouse," went on the Margravine, fixing a somewhat hard eye upon her daughter, "was well known to be deservedly happy, and widely envied in her exalted position. I am sure my daughter's merits will be no less——"

"And she has left no children," interrupted the irrepressible Margrave, "otherwise, you understand, my child, the alliance would not be so magnificent as it is."

"Is that the portrait of the Duke of Lausitz?" said the Princess.

She felt somewhat bewildered. The vision of the young Prince in the crimson mantle was quite obliterated.

"A most noble countenance," said the Margravine, taking the miniature from her husband's hand.

"A confoundedly fine man," said the Margrave, who liked to speak bluff and after the soldier fashion.

The Princess held out her hands; they trembled a little. But when she had looked at the portrait she burst out laughing—one of her childlike, uncontrolled peals—and she looked and laughed and looked and

laughed again, till the precious miniature shook her hands and the tears rolled down her plump cheeks.

Was this the reigning Duke, her future husband? This funny, fat man, with his queer nose, with his seas of cheek, his solemn, vacant eyes? Certainly the artist had given him a fine pink and white complexion, had painted his eyes very blue and his pursed-up mouth very pink; and his powdered peruke had beautiful, nice, tight, round curls! Nevertheless—

"Why, he has three chins," said the little Princess as soon as she could speak; and then she was silent again. "Three chins! Ha, ha, ha! He, he, he."

"Is our daughter daft?" asked the Margrave, growing very red in the face. "Is this your first bringing up, madam?"

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" sighed the Margravine. "this is most unseemly. Oh, my beloved Charlotte Otilie Isabella, consider your mother's feelings and the frightful responsibilities of her position."

Then, seeing that they were really shocked at her, the Princess did her best to compose herself. She curtseyed when her father told her that she was the most fortunate of maidens; she kissed her mother's hand and begged her pardon for her ill-timed levity. She never dreamed for an instant of disputing her parents' decision; and so the scowls that had gathered on the Margravian brows became speedily dispersed.

"The child is very nervous," said the Margravine, and bent and kissed her on the forehead. "She has inherited my temperament."

"Na, she is young," said the Margrave, "but marriage will soon sober her! You will have to leave

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this schoolgirl tittering behind you, Lotte." And he tapped her on the head with two hard, dry fingers. And so she was dismissed.

She laughed at intervals in little gusts all day at the thought of her regal suitor, and had a very merry hour narrating the event and describing the portrait to Toggenburg. But Toggenburg had been well drilled, and assured Her Highness that the fate before her was more brilliant than words could describe.

The next morning she awoke at peep of day. She had not allowed her curtains to be drawn the previous night, that she might see, she said, the dear trees the first thing upon opening her eyes. And so, like a bird, she was astir with the sun. Delighted, she sprang out of bed, pattered across the polished floor with little bare feet and opened the casement. Very beautiful her forest looked, yet strange, almost uncanny in this curious new light, with wreaths of mysterious vapour hanging about the dark pines, pierced here and there by long, level rays. There was a singular stir abroad, as if the great woods, too, were just aroused and stretching themselves. Pearly drops hung on the pine needles, birds called to each other, and flew hither and thither with dew-wet wings.

The Princess leant her elbows on the window-sill and gazed out as if on an enchanted world. She drew in the morning air with long breaths. Somehow, she did not know why, her heart felt strangely soft within her, and she thought again of the vision Prince she had seen in her fancy yesterday. It was a grave little face, propped upon two white hands, that looked out and saw the morning glory gather.

Presently the sound of footsteps beneath diverted her attention; and, looking down, she saw a smart young Jäger come swaggering around the corner. She knew the man; he was one of her father's attendants at the hunts here, but she had never noticed before what a dapper fellow he was, how young and well-strung was his sinewy form, nor how close and neatly the green uniform fitted it. He glanced neither to the right nor to the left, but hurried to the violet bed under her window and, stooping, began to search for flowers.

The little Princess was quite excited; she forgot all about Princes, dream or otherwise. Leaning forward she gazed down at the thief.

"He has no business," she thought, "to gather the violets!" It was delightful to see somebody doing something against rules.

But presently the scene assumed a new interest, a palpitating interest to the watcher. A straight figure emerged from the forest borders and walked with unerring step to the very spot beneath her, where the industrious picker was still working away as if for dear life: it seemed the violets were getting scarce. By the erect carriage, the superbly held yellow head, the red petticoat and the white kerchief, the little Princess easily recognised her new housemaid. The very smile of the dawn seemed to be upon her countenance. At the sound of her footsteps the man looked up.

"My Liserl," he said, and opened his arms. She flew into them and they held each other close embraced. As the little Princess looked on, her heart beat very strangely and her breath came thick and fast. She saw the man kiss the woman's cheek

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and then her lips. And then, with arms entwined and heads together, she watched them stroll away.

She drew back from the window and gave a sharp, gasping sigh, as if a strong sea wave had just broken over her.

"That is der Josef," she said to herself decidedly, and slipped back to bed. She shivered a little as she pulled the blue silk mountains over her.

After a while the sturdy forest woman crept in to light the fire; but seeing the Princess' bright eyes fixed upon her from the bed, she dipped and wished her heartily, "Good morning."

"Good morning," said the Princess. "Have you got your violets?"

The woman blushed again in the same curious way as yesterday, and up went her hand to the folds of her kerchief.

"Does he gather them for you every morning?" said the little Princess curiously.

The woman sidled towards the bed.

"See you now, Miss Princesskin," she said, "it is like this: when I and the Josef are together there is no need of the few flowers between us; but since Your Highness have come to the castle and Josef has to be about the Lord Margrave and has to sleep in the stables, and I am about my work in the chambers all day, it seems good that I should carry these little things about me over my heart. It keeps me warm-like and drives away the loneliness. And at night, you see, Miss Princess, I put them under my pillow and I dream that Josef is beside me."

"Oh, so!" said the little Princess, who did not understand at all. "And what is Josef, then, to you?"

"Ei! Gott!" cried the woman, opening her eyes wide in amazement—she thought every one the world must know. "Josef is ja my man!"

"Oh!" said Charlotte Ottilie again. She had seen a few husbands and wives in her life, beginning with her father and mother, but they had not been this description.

"You see," went on the woman, "when Josef gives me the flowers, I give him a kiss for every one; he says that keeps his heart warm till we meet next morning. Fräulein Princesschen does not think there is any harm over the few violets?" added she deprecatingly. "I always start half an hour earlier from home that I may have these minutes with Josef. It is our only meeting in the whole day!"

The little Princess was not heeding problems. She sat up in bed, her cheeks flaming.

"I saw you this morning," she said, "and how you went on. Things like that I never beheld in all my life before. What do you do it for?"

"Eh?" said the woman, her jaw dropping in amazement.

"What do you do it for?" repeated the little Princess sharply. "You know what I mean—the kissing, and the way you look when you speak to him, and the flowers and all the rest of it. What does it mean?"

"The Lord love you and preserve you for an innocent, Miss Princess," said the woman; "why, that we love each other."

"Love?" echoed the little Princess. She had heard about love, of course; children were supposed to love their parents and were told to love God, and that God loved them, and she loved her little spaniel

dog and she loved the woods. What a great many different kinds of love there seemed to be!

"Josef and I," said the peasant, the light coming back into her eyes and the smile and the blush to her face, "we loved each other always. Neighbours we were, Miss Highness, and playfellows and school-mates; and two years ago we got wed, because we loved each other so dearly. Such marriages as ours, the Father Pastor said, are made in heaven. And there is the sweetest childkin at home Your Highness ever saw. Does Your Highness like babies?"

"Your marriage was made in heaven," repeated the little Princess dreamily. Then she suddenly burst out laughing. "My marriage is made by His Highness my papa and the Ministry," she said. "Only just think, I am to marry and be a reigning Princess! I have seen the picture of my husband; he has a face like an old ox—the father ox, you know, with the big pink face—only he has a nice curled white wig. Can you fancy?" said the little Princess, shaking all over with laughter, "can you fancy the old ox in a white wig?"

"Ach, Herrje!" cried the woman and clapped her hands, "what is the child saying? God preserve us! You cannot be going to marry a gentleman with a face like an ox!"

"But I am," said Charlotte Ottilie Isabella, importantly nodding her head. "He is one of the richest Princes in the Empire—he is the Duke of Lausitz. He has already had one wife, and he is not very young, and I have never seen him. But my mother says I am extremely fortunate."

The peasant woman was nearly in tears. "Fräulein Princesschen, this is something dreadful! It

cannot be possible. Why, how could you love a gentleman like that, were he twenty times the Emperor himself?"

"Oh, love!" said the little Princess again, and stopped laughing. "You see I have not been thinking about that."

The wife of Josef stepped quite close up to the bed.

"Your Highness," she said solemnly, "I am only a poor peasant woman, but I have been taught the religion, and I know it is God's law that a man must love a maid and a maid must love a man before they can marry things if they wish to wed each other; otherwise it is a great sin."

"Oh!" said the little Princess, and fell back in bed.

There was silence for a while, the peasant woman stood gazing with pitiful eyes at the childish face and the tossed curls on the pillow. Presently the Princess said faintly:

"You had better light my fire." And there was no more conversation that morning.

In the evening when the Princess was with her mother and the ladies of the Court after supper, she remarked casually that she would prefer not to espouse the Duke of Lausitz.

"Heavens! what is this?" cried the Margravine.

"That is, of course," said the little Princess, with her pretty curtsey, "subject to your and my father's pleasure."

"But why?" gasped the exalted mother, too genuinely surprised for the moment to find room for any other feeling.

"Oh, it is very simple," said Charlotte Ottilie Isabella candidly. "You see, I do not love him, and

you know it is God's law that a man must love a maid and a maid must love a man above all things if they wish to wed each other; otherwise it is a great sin."

If the faded blue skies and the swollen cupids on the painted ceilings above them had suddenly launched forth fire and thunderbolts the poor Margravine could scarcely have been more perturbed.

"Heavens!" she ejaculated, "I never heard such wicked nonsense in my life.—Fräulein von Toggenburg, with whom can the Princess have been speaking?—To-morrow, child, the High Chancellor is expected, and your betrothal will be announced."

The little Princess was genuinely concerned and rather ashamed of herself. She went to bed in quite melancholy spirits. She did not wake till the entrance of Lise next morning; but she woke with a smile, for she had been looking forward to this moment. She had hoped, indeed, to have been at the window in time to view a repetition of the palpitating scene of yesterday.

"Have you met your Josef?" she asked, rubbing her eyes and blinking at the kneeling figure that had its back turned toward her. To her surprise the woman did not answer. The little Princess repeated her question and was alarmed to see the broad shoulders heave.

"Lise," she said, "what hast thou?"

Lise sprang to her feet and turned a besmeared and swollen visage toward her.

"Ach! Miss Princess," she cried, then flung her apron over her head and sobbed out loud.

"Mercy on us!" said the little Princess; she did not like to see people cry. "What is the matter?"

Down went the apron.

"Oh, I think my heart is broken. Oh, oh, oh!"

"Oh, dear!" said the little Princess. A broken heart sounded very serious.

"Josef was up home this morning before daybreak the woman went on between convulsive sobs, "and he says—he says—His Highness is so pleased with his service that he has given orders that he is to accompany him back to town as one of his private servants. Oh, what shall I do?"

"But, you silly woman," said the Princess, "that is very good news."

"Ah! Miss Princesschen, good news to be separated from my Josef for eleven months!" Then as if struck by a sudden flash of hope—"If Your Highness would speak, would intercede? There is the post of under-ranger, which has been vacant these six months. Josef is so knowing about the woods. A word from Your Highness——"

She came quite close to the bed and laid her work-worn, roughened hand upon the little Princess's belaced sleeve and looked into her chubby face with great, straining eyes.

"If I am going to be a reigning Highness," thought Charlotte Ottilie Isabella, "the least I can expect is to have my will done.—Do not cry, but go home now; you are not fit for work," she said aloud and placed her delicate hand over the woman's. "I shall see that you get what you want."

Then the little Princess arose in a great hurry. She could hardly wait, indeed, to have her morning chocolate and accomplish her toilet: she was sadly indifferent to decorum, in spite of her excellent upbringing. She sent, before her hair was powdered, to demand an audience of her father.

This unprecedented request threw the Margrave into a fine fuss. He had heard from the Margravine of the Princess' remarkable conduct of the night before and anticipated nothing less than set resistance to his cherished desires. He gave orders that his daughter should be admitted immediately—although he himself was yet in his nightcap and dressing-gown—and prepared to receive her with all the thunders of parental authority.

She tripped into the room, however, with the most cheerful countenance in the world, dropped him a magnificent curtsey, and said :

"The Duchess of Lausitz has a petition to make."

The Margrave was so relieved that he would have given her anything she asked on the spot. He pinched the little Princess' cheek and vowed she was a rogue; she clapped her hands, radiant with joy.

Back again in her room, laughing out loud to herself, she rushed to the window to share her happiness with her beloved forest. It was raining hard from a dull grey sky, and the raindrops went patter, patter upon every side. The trees looked as if they liked it, and the little Princess thought it had a pleasant sound.

"We have done a good stroke of business," she said, nodding at the pine; "you shall keep der Josef and your Liserl will not have to weep."

The pine tops swayed and nodded back to her.

"They are quite glad," thought Charlotte Ottilie Isabella.

Suddenly across the clearing between the forest and the castle she saw the figure of the new ranger pass like a flash.

"He has gone home," she thought, and was seized

with an intense desire to be witness of his joy meeting with his wife. She flung a lace shawl over her untidy head; and, without other preparation, slipped out of the castle into the rain, in her lace and her beribboned morning frock and her little yellow satin slippers.

"They can't scold me now," she told herself, smiling, "that I am going to be a reigning Princess."

Down the slippery path she went, still smiling and delighted with the falling rain and the wet smell of the leaves and the charming sense of mischief and freedom. Soon a whitewashed cottage glimmered before her. She skipped across the wet moss and peeped in at the low window.

"Is this the place?" she wondered.

Sure enough, for that was Liserl's unmistakable yellow head, and there was Liserl sitting in a chair and at her feet knelt the dapper Josef. His arms were around her waist, her hands were on his shoulders; they were looking into each other's eyes. Farther off stood old white-capped Gretel, her wrinkled face all rapture, holding a chubby baby that waved its little hands and feet, and seemed to be crowing and dancing in unison with the general jubilee. In another second Liserl's head sank forward upon Josef's shoulder and the little Princess turned away.

"I don't think I will look at them any more," she said. She turned to make her way home, but her steps were very slow and her face was thoughtful. In that little room she had looked into, but which had held a great joy.

"After all," said the Princess to herself, "it is something to be a reigning Princess; one can always

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do good!" Then all at once she began to run, stumbling over the rough ground. The mud sucked off one of her yellow slippers, but she would not stop to put it on again; she wanted to get back to her own room as quickly as ever she could, and she did not want any one to see her. For as she went the little Princess was crying.

The wood-ranger's wife found the yellow slipper in the mud and recognised it at once by its colour and smallness. She lifted it tenderly, cleaned it with her apron and swore that she never would part with it. And thus it remained in the family and was a cherished heirloom long after its owner had ceased to laugh—or to weep.

* * * * *

It is no doubt (even now, as we write) throwing a gleam of faded colour from under its glass case in a corner of a dark, low-ceiled room of the chief forester's house, near Tannenfels. It was there that we saw it on a certain day, some years ago, having taken refuge under its hospitable roof during a thunderstorm. We wondered at it, of course, and mused long over it. And finally, from the vaguely alluring mist of the past, we elucidated the only plausible account of its preservation, in all its rococo quaintness, deep among the woods, among the household gods of large-footed forest folk.

The further story of the Little Princess, who having been sold in marriage for convenience of State, was so little like ever to know love herself, seemed to us one that ought to be followed up. We found, however, little about poor Charlotte Ottilie Isabella (alas, no longer Princesse Rit-Toujours when she had become Duchess

of Lausitz) beyond the fact that, of the wicked union that laughing child-wife with the mature reigning Prince, there was but one offspring—Marie-Otilie. From her mother the heiress of Lusatia took her grace and high spirits, and valiant, sunny heart; from her father, happily, nought but her life and her name.

*Of Marie-Otilie, the young Princess of Lusatia, on the other hand, fuller records were discovered, as a result of deep and sympathetic research. Among other things it was ascertained quite clearly, even at this great distance of time, that one of her innermost thoughts as she grew to womanhood was a firm resolve, God willing, never to be disposed of as her mother had been for State purposes; a determination, if on her part she found love, true and loyal, not to let it be brushed aside by royal parchment and rule of etiquette or hereditary prejudice. How she fared when the hour and the man had come (as they were bound to come) is already known to the readers of a certain romance of ours. And it may interest the latter to hear that in this unpretending tale of a yellow slipper lurked the *idée mère* of THE PRIDE OF JENNICO, even as the little laughing Princess of Ansbach was destined to give birth to the brave, witty and bright-souled Marie-Otilie of Lausitz.*

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