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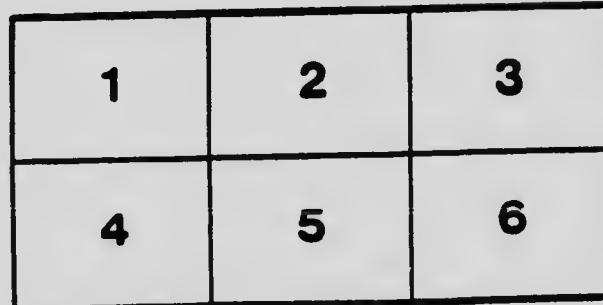
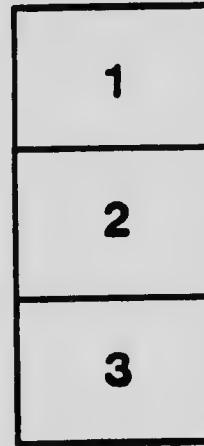
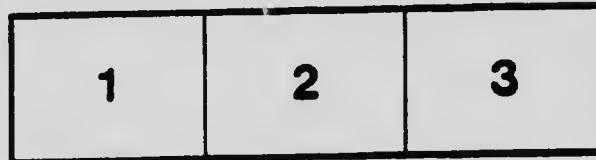
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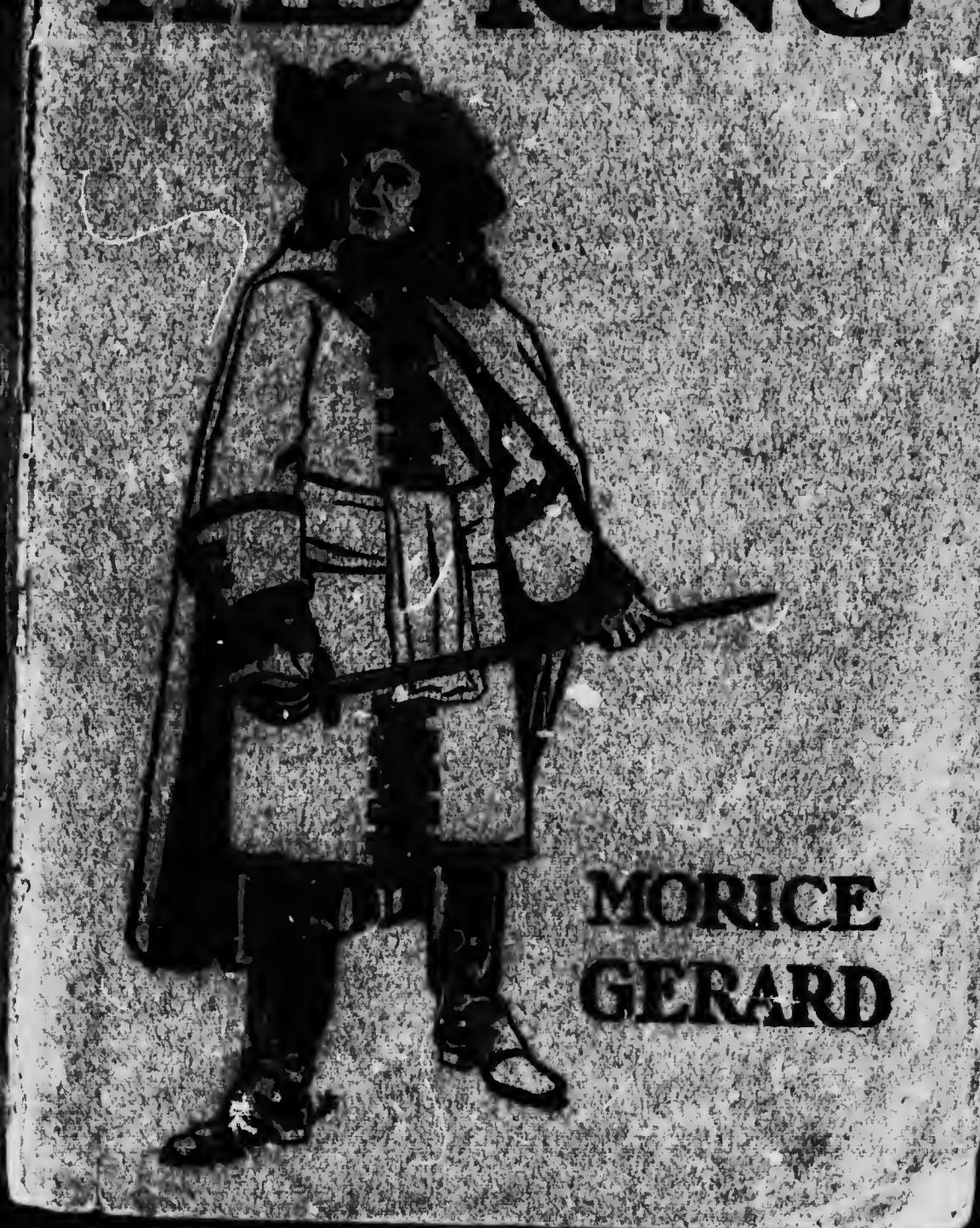
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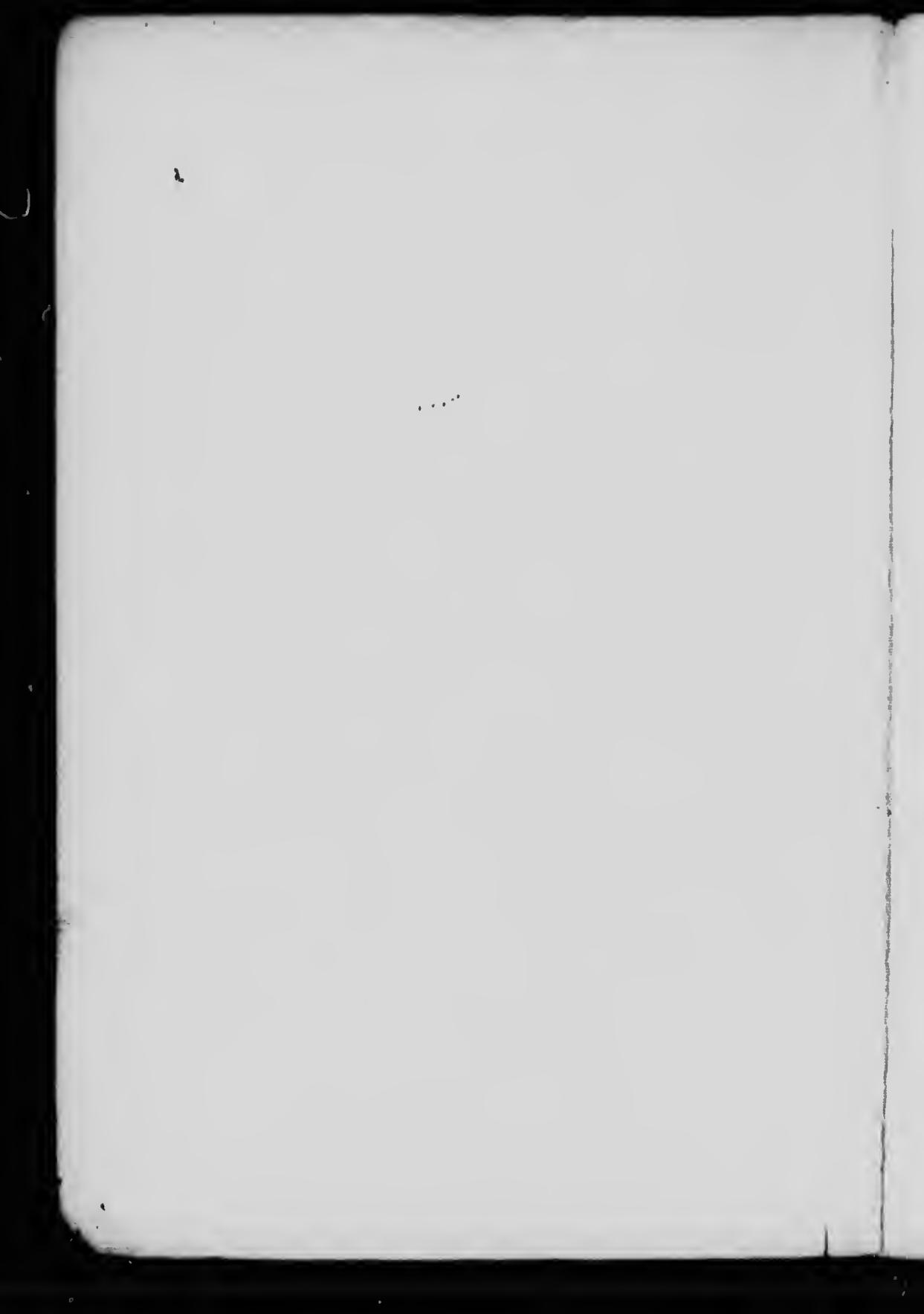
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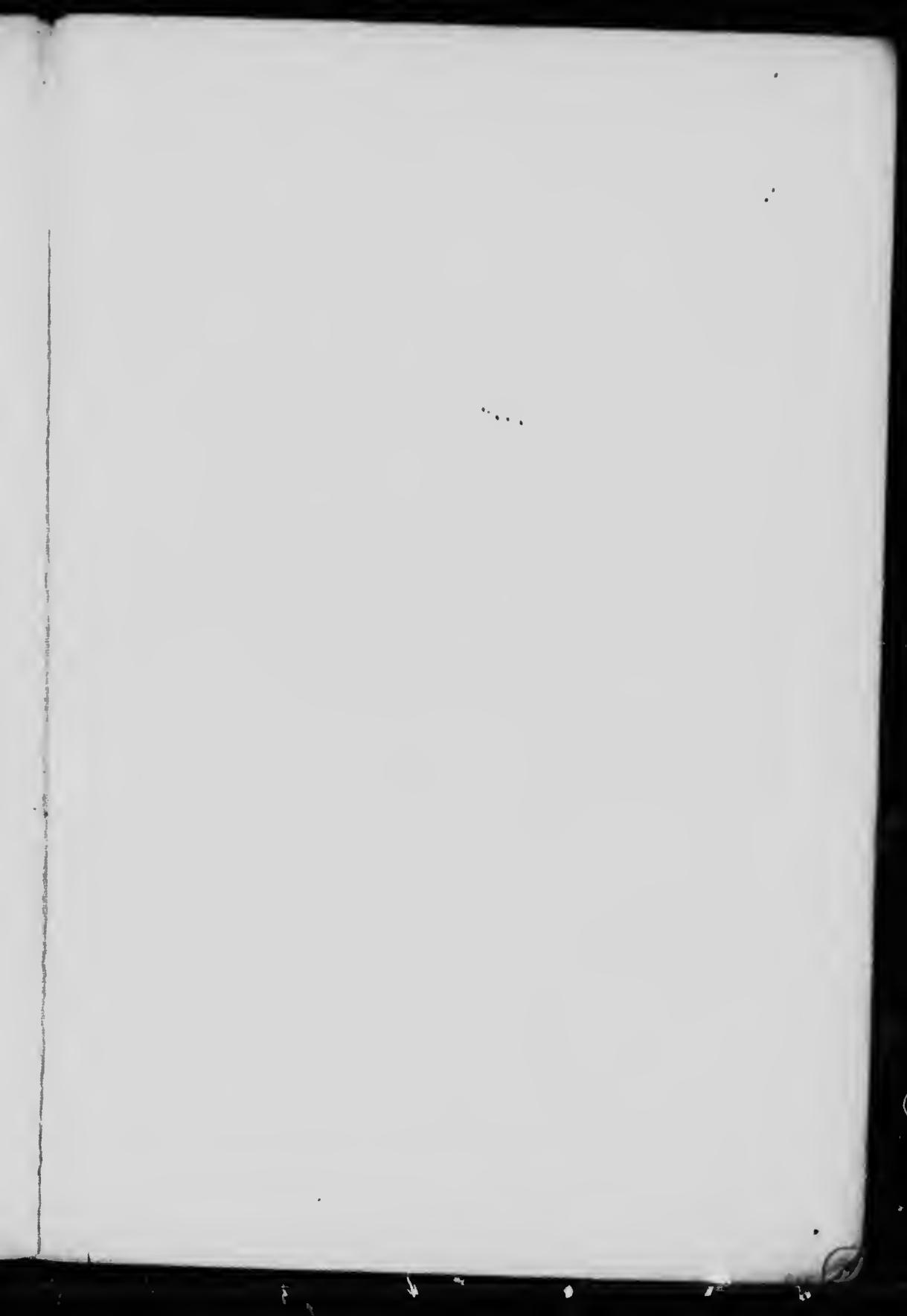
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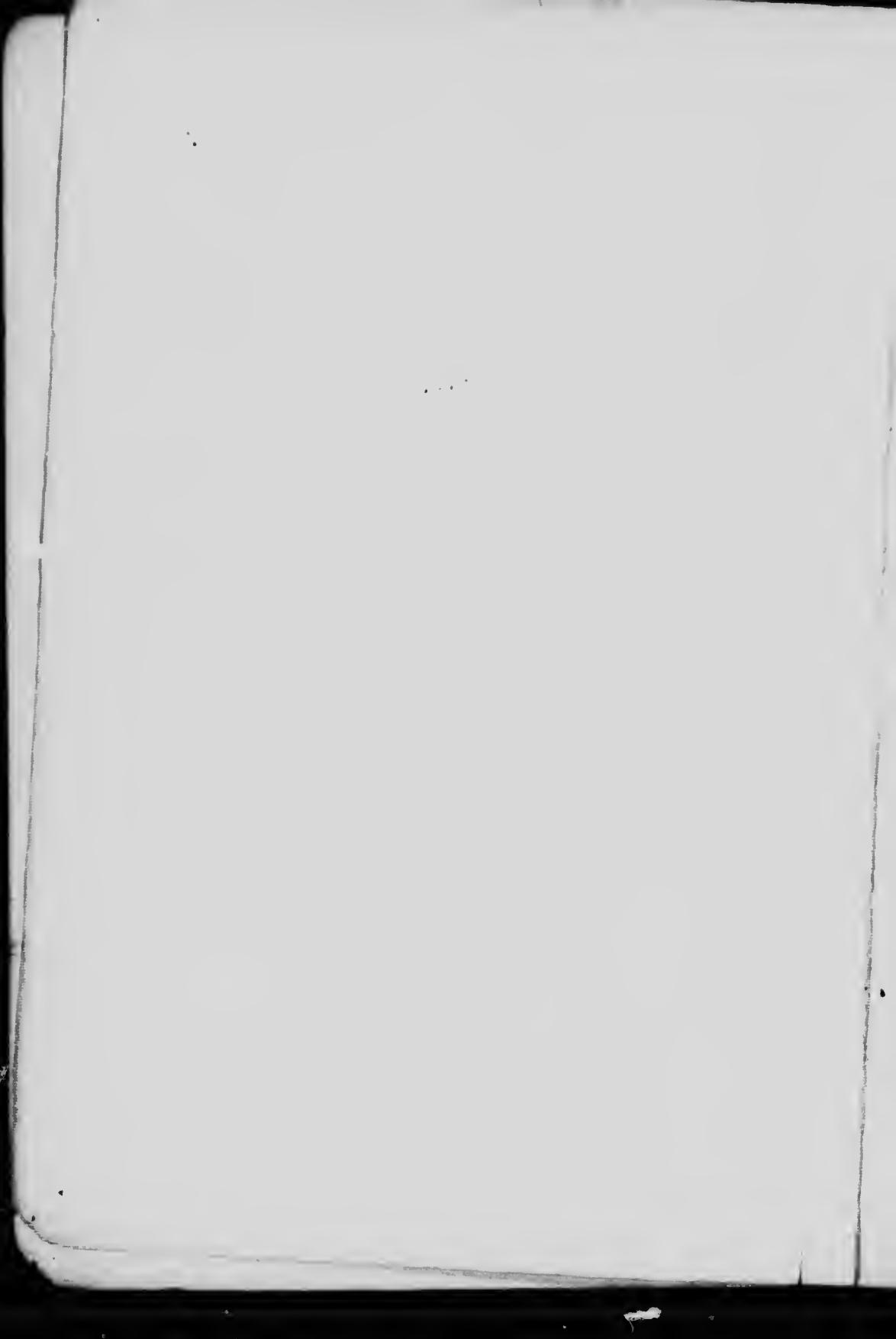
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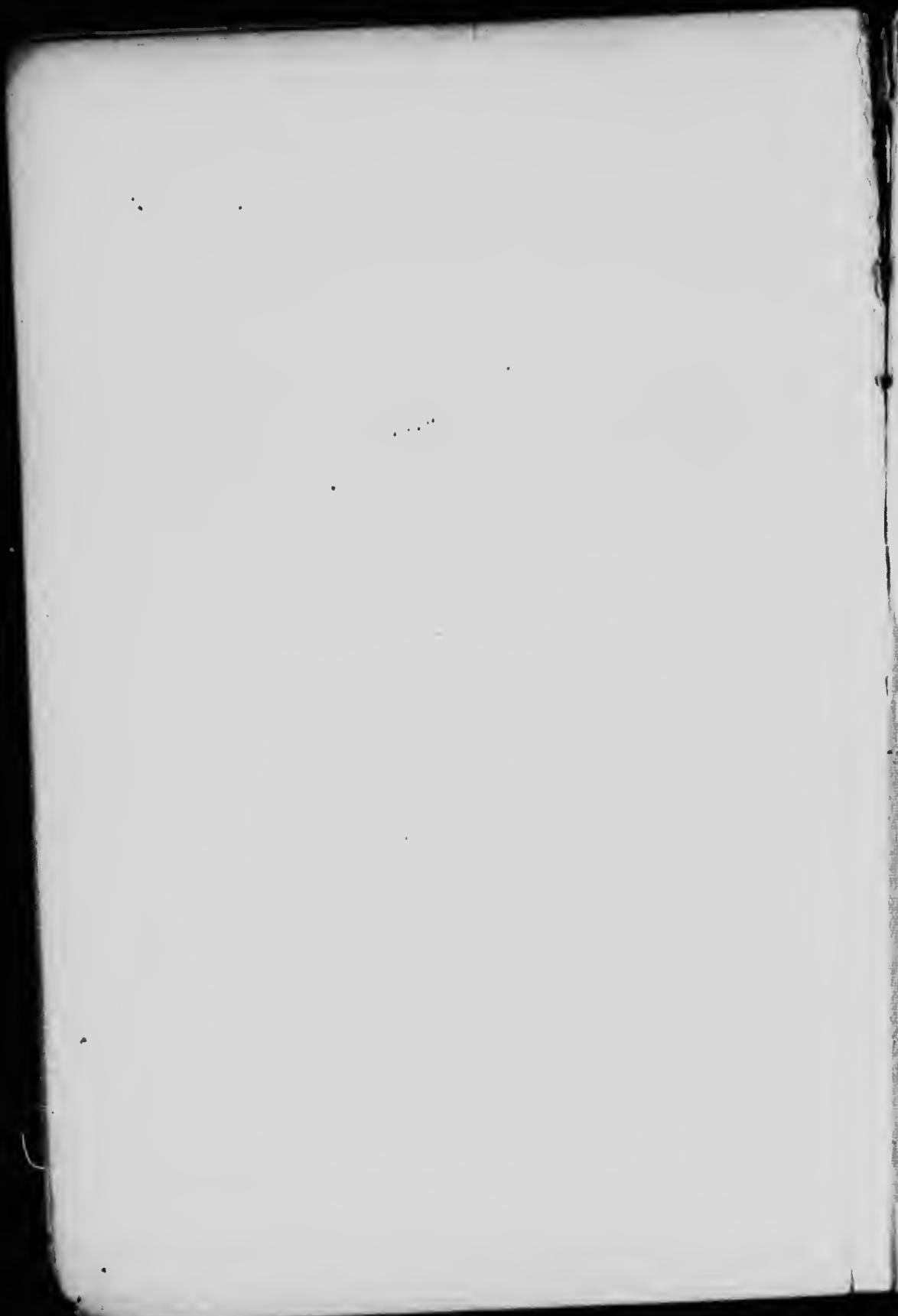
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**CHECK TO THE KING**



# CHECK TO THE KING

BY

MORICE GERARD

AUTHOR OF "THE RED SEAL," "THE TENANT OF THE GRANGE,"  
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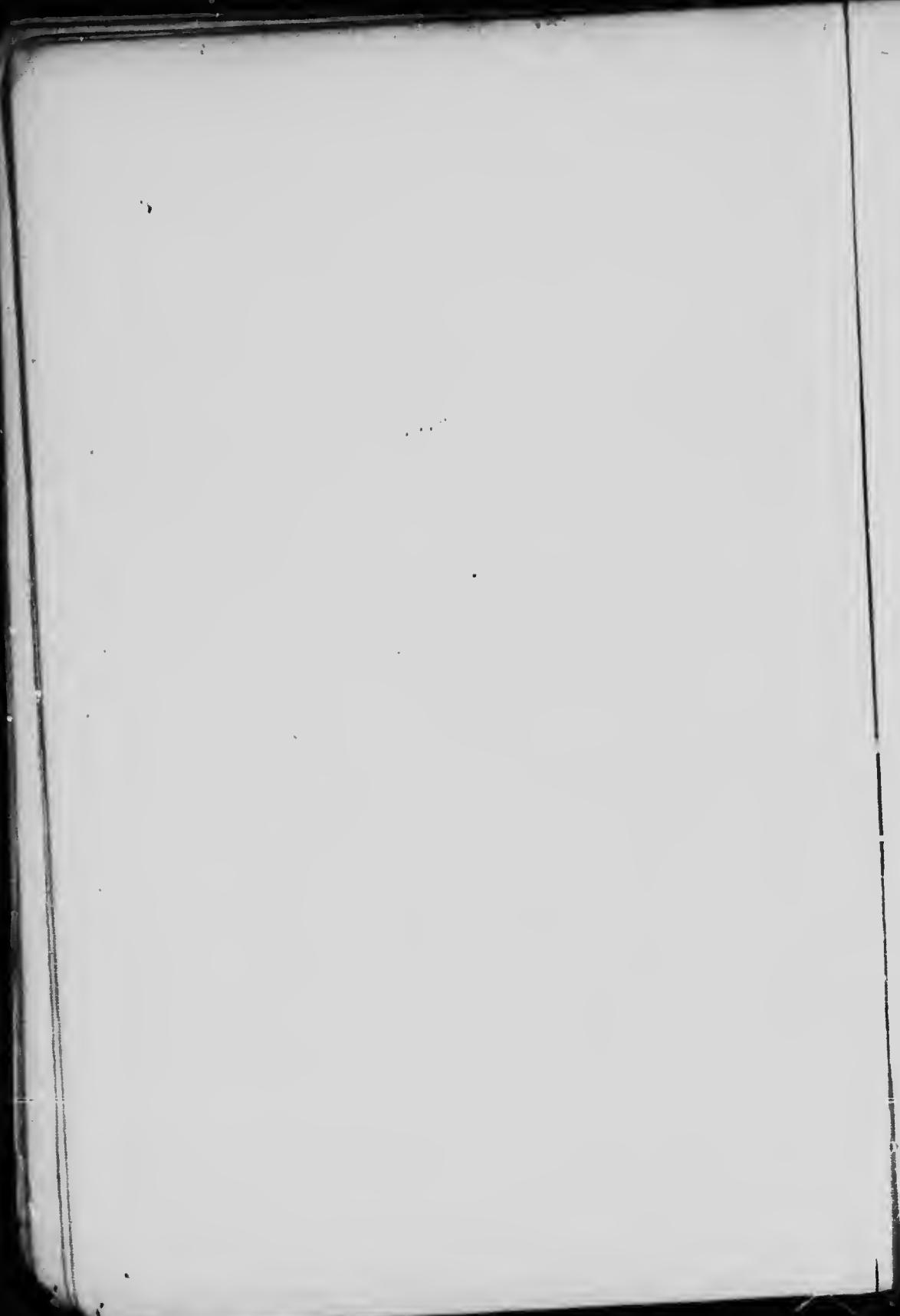
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**TO THE  
RIGHT HONOURABLE  
SIR JOHN KENNAWAY, M.P.  
THIS  
BOOK IS DEDICATED.**



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*Allan K. D. Willis*

## CHAPTER I

### FENCING

THE Lady Lettice clapped her hands.

She was sitting on the wide window-seat watching us. I felt myself flush under my mask. It was quite true her brother, Lord Godfrey, had found his way through my defence. Had we not been using foils guarded with buttons at the point, I should certainly have been pinkel. It was creditable of the boy; he had learnt the trick from me, and I had been taught it years ago by my body-servant, Duncan Macalister. The latter had served in a famous French regiment, in the forces of His Most Catholic Majesty Louis XIV., for several years. There Duncan had learnt all that the best French *maitres d'armes* could teach. After his return to my father's employ at Etherington Manor he had taken me in hand, and soon I was master of all the tricks of fence myself. Then had followed the piece of luck of my life when I had become equerry to John Churchill. With him I had seen service under the great Turenne. In these campaigns Churchill had won for himself a name second to none either in the armies of England or France. James II. had attached him especially to his own person during his brother's lifetime, and

## FENCING

since his accession to the throne had shown him many marks of Royal favour.

Yet was there a decided rift in the lute. Churchill, with his wife, the Lady Sarah, only occasionally visited Whitehall, although a Groom-of-the-bed-chamber to the King. They spent much time in retirement, and had lately been residing at Ash House, on the borders of Dorset and Devon.

The reason of all this was the obstinate determination on the part of King James to override the laws of the land in favour of his co-religionists. Neither Lord Churchill nor I had any prejudice against gentlemen of the Roman Catholic Faith—we had seen too much abroad of the high character and generous actions displayed by men of the King's religion—but ourselves were attached most firmly to the Church of England, in which we had been bred. In addition, the fear of Royal supremacy being substituted for laws which safeguarded the liberties of England was a very real one amongst all classes in the realm.

Many men have sought to find various reasons for the defection of the gentlemen of England, during the period at which we had now arrived. Aspersions have been cast which are little merited. My master and I have incurred no little obloquy, in company with countless others sharing the best blood of England. But if the story be ever impartially told, it will be found that both honour and loyalty lay behind what seems, to some unversed in the hidden history of our time, to resemble dishonour and disloyalty.

It was revolving thoughts like these, and pressed

with anxiety as to what the future might bring, that diverted my attention on that October afternoon in the armoury of Cawston Castle. In fencing, as in everything else which requires quickness of eye and surety of touch, it is necessary that the mind should be unclouded and the attention concentrated. Such were not mine, so Lord Godfrey got in through my defence, as already related, and the Lady Lettice exhibited her glee by clapping her delicate hands together smartly.

I cannot deny that something else, besides the anxieties of the public service, also diverted my attention while Godfrey was attacking in a more spirited fashion than was his wont. The Lady Lettice, perched on the window-seat with her dainty shoes dangling, had the rays of the westerling sun playing about her hair and bringing into relief the rounded contour of the cheek which was turned slightly to one side, the other being in comparative obscurity. We were fencing at one end of the armoury, so as to make the light as impartial as possible. I had always held the youth easily at the point of my weapon. This fact had no doubt bred in me a certain carelessness, the most dangerous of prepossessions. I allowed my eyes, from time to time, to shoot a glance at the picture displayed all too near to me. Was the Lady Lettice aware that she had succeeded in dividing my regard? Had she stationed herself there on purpose to bring about my confusion? I had never seen her in the embrasure before.

It was quite possible, and I well knew it. Three months' acquaintance with Lettice Latour, Lord

## FENCING

Cawston's only daughter, had sufficed to convince me how little I knew of womankind, least of all of this particular specimen of her sex. She was on the verge of full maturity, just about to leave her teens behind her, while her brother Godfrey was about a year her junior. Lady Lettice was a sprite. She could hardly have been more than five feet two inches high, but on occasions could draw herself up, as if to add to her stature a cubit denied to her by nature. Her moods seemed never the same ; they puzzled a plain man like myself exceedingly. Yet at Court I had met many ladies of high degree, and in the more adventurous parts of my life, as the readers of my previous memoirs <sup>will recollect</sup>, I had been brought into contact with the opposite sex not a little. But Lady Lettice had an individuality all her own, which perpetually afforded me surprises and baffled my penetration. Her eyes were black and sparkling ; she wore her hair brushed from her fine forehead and falling in one long curl over her ivory neck ; her nose and lips were small, the latter arched into a cupid's bow ; her chin was full and rather prominent. It denoted character, but of what nature I found it hard to decide. In her eyes, more often than not, sparkled wit and drollery, yet were there depths in them which sometimes seemed to portend a lurking sadness, some deeper feeling not allowed expression. Five years ago the Earl of Cawston had lost his wife, the Countess. Possibly this terrible disaster to the girl had left its traces ; at least, I used so to imagine. Then she would laugh so gaily, she would twit my seriousness with

: "Adventures of an Equerry."

so much mockery, I doubted the impression I had formed before. In fence I was the master of her brother, but in this other kind of fence was the Lady Lettice my mistress. But then, in a sense, she ever fought with a sharpened point, while I only used the foil.

John Churchill had been known, of course, to Lord Cawston for many years, but I had only made the acquaintance of the family since we had been at Ash House on this last visit. One day I had met the party out hawking, a pastime to which Lady Lettice was addicted. She had strayed from the rest of her company, and her pony having got over its fetlocks in the mud of a morass, formed by an overflowing of the river Axe, the spirited animal had begun to plunge and rear. I had been fishing near by, and had just landed a fine salmon, when I heard a girl's call. I ran to the rescue, and found her like to be thrown from her seat. She was a capital horsewoman, but the occasion was one to try the finest skill. I had seized the pony's head, and with considerable exercise of both force and persuasion had got the spirited animal safely on to the higher ground. In doing so I managed to cover myself with yellow slime and mud from lace collar to boots. As soon as the pony ceased its struggles, and the girl's attention was no longer directed to keeping her seat and striving to control her mount, she looked full at me. Then she laughed, not loudly, but with a silvery tinkle of intense appreciation, at my battered and dishevelled appearance. She was terribly contrite immediately afterwards for the gracelessness of her gratitude, but the sound of her

laughter remained on my ears. When I looked at myself in the polished mirror at Ash House subsequently, and found that my face, as well as my dress—even the very feather of my hat—had enjoyed a mud baptism, I no longer wondered at the lady's amusement.

What the Lady Lettice was at the beginning of our acquaintance, that she had remained. Laughter followed by apologies; the humorous side of things ever mingling with the more strenuous aspects of life.

It puzzled me sometimes to see the way in which her father, the Earl, one of the wisest and most considered men of that part of England, turned to his daughter for counsel on the gravest subjects; not merely those that had to do with the keeping of the Castle and wide estates adjoining it, but even with reference to affairs of State, about which it might be thought that a girl, who had only once been to Court, could have no opinion.

Having but little to do at Ash House as regards my duties in the capacity of Equerry to Lord Churchill, he being absent a good deal in conference with other leaders of the State, I had the more time to study that particular object of interest which presented itself in the character of our neighbour, Lord Cawston's, daughter.

At any other time in my life this would have been out of the question. I should have been much too busy and preoccupied with my duties, for from the first moment that I entered the service of that great hero, soldier, and statesman, afterwards to become his Grace of Marlborough, I had made up my mind

to let nothing interfere with my devotion to my duties. When, however, John Churchill did not require me, I was free to wander with my rod down the reaches of Axe stream, or to find my way on various pretexts to Cawston Castle, where from the date of that first rescue of its young mistress I had ever a warm welcome.

Having explained these matters, I now return to the story of that October day, which at the commencement seemed like to be a period of no moment, resembling other days of that month which had gone before it. The events of that afternoon and night, whether small or great, insignificant or significant, stand out illuminated in my memory; very much as the Lady Lettice's face was picked out in the sunlight as she sat watching us in the window-seat.

Piqued by the girl's laughter, which echoed in an almost inaudible chuckle from her brother's lips, I directed my attention and threw all my skill into the fencing bout, which had hitherto been treated by me altogether lightly. Before many seconds were over, Lord Godfrey's foil was twisted from his hand, and first striking the moulded ceiling, fell almost beneath his sister's feet.

"There, Mr. Equerry," she cried, "you have the revenge of both of us. Godfrey and I yield ourselves vanquished, and out of the largeness of our hearts invite our conqueror to partake of that meal, which the light of the setting sun, and something within likewise, suggest must be almost ready."

In obedience to her direction, Godfrey and I removed our masks, and hung up the foils we had

been manipulating, on the wall. The armoury, as befitted its name, was a museum of weapons of all kinds. Each generation of Latours had added to the collection, and as they had held Cawston Castle from the time of Edward III., the walls presented sufficient variety to represent the martial history of England.

Lord Godfrey and I retired to wash off the results of our exertions. A few minutes later the great bell of the Castle summoned us all to dinner. The principal meal of the day was served at half-past five. The Earl had come in during the time that his son and I had occupied with fencing. He greeted me with cordiality. I had not seen him for several days. It struck me that his fine face was clouded with more than usual anxiety. During the meal he spoke but little and seemed preoccupied with his own thoughts.

At the close, as he rose from table after the chaplain had said a long Latin grace, the Earl, turning to me, said : " You are not leaving for home yet, Mr. Lesterne, I suppose ? "

" Not immediately, my lord," I answered. " Lord Churchill has been away, but is expected back to-night. He will probably want me on his return."

" I am aware of it," he replied, ignoring the last part of my remarks. " I should like to see you before you leave the Castle."

" Shall I wait on you, my lord, in half an hour's time ? "

" Yes, that will do very nicely. I have a letter to write to my Lord Churchill, which I shall ask you to deliver to him in person when alone."

"Your directions shall be carried out, my lord," I answered.

"Oh! I trust you absolutely, Mr. Lesterne, else, should I not place this matter in your hands."

After this the Earl left the room. Godfrey also departed. Lady Lettice and I were left alone.

"You will come into my boudoir, Mr. Equerry?"

I bowed, and holding the door open, Lady Lettice passed through. We traversed the long passage and entered a small apartment on the right-hand side, near the further end. It was now dark; one of the maidens had lighted candles in silver sconces above the mantelpiece. The boudoir bore evidences of the use to which it was put. A spinet was in one corner; some embroidery lay on a table. A chess-board occupied a prominent place.

Lady Lettice and I had often matched our wits against one another in the game. As a rule, however, I stood a small chance against her skill. Her eyes would dance with joy when she saw me fairly penned in a corner. The tone of triumph with which she would say "Check to the king," and then "Check-mate," would ring in my ears as I rode home, and thought of the various way in which my fate might have been averted.

"It is too late for a game of chess now, I am afraid," I said.

The Lady Lettice walked to the board, and stood looking down upon it. The "men" had been left just as they had been played with last. The majority, both red and white, were grouped at the sides, captives. The poor red king was hemmed in

by his adversaries with but a sparse following, the white forces having gained the day.

The Lady Lettice stood looking at the board, and I looked at her. I took in the dainty setting of her head; the beautiful column of her neck; the grace of her petite figure—not for the first time. Suddenly she turned round and her eyes met mine. In her face was a look somewhat strange to it. It baffled me. I hardly knew how to interpret it. It was whimsical, yet sad; gay, and yet thoughtful.

"I am sorry for the poor king, although where there are two opposed to one another, one must win and the other must lose. It would not matter so much, but how many other poor heads fall in the making and in the un-making!"

I hardly knew how to answer her. We had played games together many times and had discussed them, but never in a tone of sympathy, as if they were flesh-and-blood conflicts.

"I have never thought of it in that light, Lady Lettice. The pawns are only pawns, after all, and the knights and bishops very little better."

"Pawns!" she cried; "are we not all pawns in some game? Under whichever king we fight, some must lose their heads: some must fall, never in this world to rise again. Have you ever thought of that, Mr. Lesterne?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"In my life," I said, "I have never known a choice. I have always had to obey orders."

"Ah! orders; but whose orders?—that is the question."

"My master's."

"How single-minded you are, Mr. Equerry, to have only one master, and to serve him faithfully. In these days there be few who have only one, and to serve any one faithfully, in this realm of England, seems the rarest grace of all."

"I do not understand you, Lady Lettice," I responded once more, having nothing better to say.

She laughed. It was not a mirthful laugh, such as the one she gave when she beat me at chess. It had sarcasm in it, and a tinge of sadness. I felt the undercurrent, and it grated on my ears.

"You will," she averred, "Mr. Equerry, before you are much older, or I am not a witch."

"God guide us aright!"

"Amen to that," she responded fervently. "We have heard so much of late of the divine right of Kings." She turned and glanced at the board, and waved her hand by way of illustration. "But when there are two Kings, who shall decide which monarch has the divine right?"

"Might is right, I have heard said in such cases."

Lady Lettice nodded. Then she broke off into quite another channel, as she was wont to do, greatly puzzling her host.

"I would I were a man, Mr. Equerry; and the more I wish it, the more I am conscious of my womanhood."

The Lady Lettice was not one to speak in coquetry, nor am I an adept in paying a compliment. Had the one or the other been different, this was my opportunity, for assuredly her womanhood was of the attractive order, and I could have said so

readily, without breach of truth. Instead, I tried to follow her train of thought, and failed signally.

"You can fence," I said, "as well as any man; and ride, and fish."

"Oh, yes! I can fence," with a stress on the last word; "what woman cannot?—but when it comes to action, or to take part in counsel, we are left behind as of no moment." She turned to me almost tragically. "Do you think I have forgotten the Monmouth days, when the Earl wavered whether he should join him or no? It was not I who kept him back, although I tried my utmost. It was only his pride of birth and ancestry, and the thought that Monmouth sprang from the gutter, or thereabouts. My lord would never have put the crown on the Duke's head, even for the liberties of England and the Protestant Faith, which he holds so dear."

"Of course William is different," I put in, following her train of thought vaguely.

"Yes! William and Mary," with an emphasis on the second name. "To my father, no Dutchman need apply, but an English Princess of the Protestant Faith—ah! there you touch the Earl to the quick, Mr. Equerry."

"Then you think?" I said.

The Lady Lettice raised her arms wearily.

"Yes," she replied. "I think! and think! and think! I think by night, and I think by day. I think while I am riding, while I am eating, while I am fencing with Godfrey. I think when I am sleeping, in dreams—dreams which come back to me when waking. What is there left for a woman to do in these days, but to think?"

I was carried away with the flood of her eloquence, and had nothing to reply. She went on after a pause. I could see that she was pressing her hands together until her finger-tips were white, in the stress of her emotion.

"I tell you, Mr. Equerry, that blood will flow like water in this England of ours before many days are over, unless your James is of different stock than the Stuarts have been before him—the very poltroon of his race. Heads will fall on the block—the noblest heads in England maybe—in addition to the men who give their lives on the battlefield."

I could see that the Earl's daughter was hardly thinking of me at all. She was seeing visions, waking visions, which are ever worse than sleeping ones, because they are more real.

"I do not see what one man can do in this case," I put in.

"One man can do a great deal. Your King James, for instance. Why does he not shake off the trammels of this Father Petre, who they say is at the back of the throne, hardly seen, but all powerful? Why does not James remember the lesson of his childhood—the lessons of Naseby and Dunbar, and that final terrible lesson on the balcony of White-hall?"

"Perhaps he will," I suggested lamely.

"No, he will not. He will lose his crown first. Look at his long narrow face, the stubborn determination in his eyes. He is a fanatic. Any one can see it at a glance. I have only been to Court once, but the memory of that vision suffices. He will learn no lessons, that James of yours, any

more than his father did before him. The Court was full of ecclesiastics as I saw it, and they never change. Their faith forbids it." She broke off, and began again: "Ah! Captain Lesterne, there is one man who might perhaps have done something to avert the storm, who had some influence, if all be true that I hear, over the bigot on the throne, who might have dissuaded him from the course, which could only end in the ruin of England and the shedding of her best blood."

I did not fail to understand her, or pretend otherwise.

"You mean my Lord Churchill," I said.

"Yes, Mr. Equerry, I mean my Lord Churchill, who sits sulking at Ash House when he ought to have been at Whitehall or Windsor; who says, if report does not speak him false, neither yea nor nay to either party, but holds them both in doubt as to which side he leans to, and whom he will serve when the critical moment comes and a decision must be made."

I was nettled somewhat by what she said, and drew myself up stiffly.

"You forget, madam, that Lord Churchill is my master and friend."

"Oh, no! I do not forget it. Else should I not speak to you as I do. Is there not yet a hope that he will intervene to the salvation of his country?"

"Believe me, Lady Lettice, my Lord Churchill has done his utmost, and, if earnest advice could have achieved the result, it had been gained long ago. But nothing short of my lord changing his faith

would satisfy King James. My master's words are disregarded. Their weight is but a feather, against those of men who hold to the King's religion, or profess that they do, which comes to the same thing. If Churchill wavers, he does so for reasons which do credit to his heart, if not to his head. He was confidential friend and servant to James Stuart when the Prince was only Duke of York, and these ties of affection bind him still. On the other hand, he sees the liberties of England and her faith dragged at the King's chariot wheels. If Churchill wavers, he wavers between personal affection and public weal."

As I said the last words there was a knock at the door, and the Earl's own body-servant entered, in obedience to the Lady Lettice's direction.

"My lord would like to see you, Captain Lesterne, in his private room, if it suits your convenience." Godstone bowed low as he said the words.

"I will be with the Earl in a moment," I replied.

The man left the room and I was about to follow, when Lady Lettice laid her fingers on my arm and detained me. The touch thrilled me strangely, I could not have told why. It implied confidence, regard, I had almost said something stronger. The Lady Lettice had always held me at a certain distance. Never before had she opened her heart as she had done these last few minutes. She was moved, and so was I, yet I could not have told in what way, and perhaps she could not have, either. The boudoir seemed charged with emotion, but it was an emotion I failed to analyse. A crisis was

in the air, and its imminence stirred our hearts. She spoke :

"The Earl believes in you, Mr. Equerry, more than you realise. He knows you honourable and straight, while other men turn and twist like the weather-vane on Cawston Tower."

I flushed. It was pleasant to hear these words from her lips, nevertheless I thought she overstated the case. Lord Cawston had always been kind to me, but as an old man, or rather middle-aged, to one young enough to be his son.

"What do you wish me to do?" I asked gently.

"To keep him back. Why should he be of the first to move? He is not a politician. He has nothing to gain, and all to lose. Why should he side with white or red? Let those lead who have made themselves responsible in the counsels of the party which is opposed to James. If my father goes from Cawston, I go with him; of that I am determined. I will not be a woman left behind to wait and fear, and fear and wait." Once more she changed her mood. Her eyes had flashed, now they looked at me as pleadingly as her pride would allow. "Do you advise him, Mr. Equerry, to wait. This is a game of chess with living pieces. It will soon be over when once the first move is made. Who knows which king will win, the red or white? But if the red conquers, as I think he will, more blood will flow than drenched the scaffold of the ill-fated, craven Monmouth."

I knew she meant James II. by the red king.

"I will do my best, Lady Lettice, believe me, but

the Earl is not one lightly to be moved, especially if he thinks that principle is at stake."

"Thank you," she replied.

I bowed low, and kissed her fingers, holding them in my hand. With this touch thrilling me, I shut the door of the boudoir behind me.

## CHAPTER II

### THE EARL'S CLOSET

CAWSTON CASTLE had been built in stages. The right wing, in which was the Earl's own suite of rooms, was the oldest part of the building. Then came the centre block, where were the reception-rooms and the great dining-hall, only used on state occasions. The left wing, in which were the armoury and my Lady Lettice's boudoir, had been erected by the present lord's father.

Ivy grew wantonly over the whole structure, old and new alike, so that the centuries were blended together, and it was hard for a stranger to say which part was of ancient date and which more modern. This was true externally, but internally the contrast between old and new was much more obvious. The French style of architecture had influenced the Earl's father, who was his own designer.

The rooms occupied by Lord Cawston, on the other hand, were built on different lines. Tapestry covered the walls. Tortuous passages led from room to room. Short flights of steps interposed here and there. The external wall had been loopholed, for the purposes of offence and defence, during the Wars of the Roses. These were blocked now for

the most part with brickwork, but one or two high up in the passages had been left, perhaps for objects of ventilation and light. The wind moaned through these latter in eerie fashion as I walked from one end of the upper floor of the Castle to the other, my mind full of strangely conflicting emotions. On the one hand I was thrilled with the touch of Lady Lettice's fingers and the confidences she had imparted to me; on the other, my mind was charged with forebodings as to the immediate future which lay before us all.

As I reached the older part of the Castle I was struck, not for the first time, with the opportunities its structure afforded for concealment, if any one were minded not to let his presence be known. Except for the three apartments assigned to the Earl himself, the rooms in this wing were small, and the whole was honeycombed by passages, with here and there dark embrasures let into the wall, where once there had been narrow windows.

After dark—and the dark sets in early when October begins to herald the on-coming winter—a man might lurk unnoticed, unsuspected, in a dozen hiding-places. Our conversation in the boudoir had stimulated my imagination. I walked warily, my right hand resting lightly on the jewelled dagger which had been given me by Churchill himself, a pretty weapon, but serviceable likewise, which ever hung at my belt, part hidden by my embroidered coat. No one was likely to attack me, or any one else at Cawston. Peace reigned outwardly, although spies on both sides moved freely in all directions.

The King had horse soldiery at various points in the West, which was ever of rebellious turn in the days of the second James, and probably he had them in the North too, where, if William landed, it was expected his fleet would make its appearance.

I had to feel my way through the darkness, which by this time was dense enough, over stairways and passages. It was with some relief that I felt the silver falcon of the Latours under my touch, as I turned the handle of the Earl's closet.

As readers of my previous memoirs will be well aware, although young I have had my share of stirring doings, in field, and castle, and camp, but never before had I been moved by personal sympathies and considerations as I was to-day. This was my own land. The history that was in the making was that of my own country. The blood that would be shed, if shed it was, was that of my own kin. Only the man who stands on the brink of civil war can realise the horrors of the darkness of that abyss.

I came into the light out of the darkness. Silver candelabra stood on the table at which the Earl was sitting, throwing a strong light on his face. An oil lamp, of antique pattern, casting a dull, yellow glare in contrast to the whiteness shed by the candles, hung on a chain in the centre of the apartment, which was of no mean dimensions, although generally called the Earl's closet. At one end of the room, furthest from the door, at the back of Lord Cawston's seat, was a great piece of tapestry, brought from France by one of the Earl's ancestors in the reign of Henry VIII. It filled the greater part

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of the wall from fresco to floor. Close to the tapestry was another door, by which the Earl could descend a steep flight of steps into the terraced garden, which was reserved for his own private walking.

Lord Cawston gave me a look of greeting, and motioned me to a chair by his side. The full light of the candles brought his fine face into strong relief. I had never seen him look so careworn and anxious. He was a strong man physically, and had a domed forehead indicating not a little intellectual power. Some irresolution lurked about his lips, I had fancied sometimes, but his eyes belied this, being grave and clear. As I walked across the room it seemed to me that the heavy tapestry moved somewhat. I dismissed the idea, instantly, from my mind; no doubt, if it were true, some wind stirred it, permeating from the external wall of the Castle.

Yet, had I reflected, the tapestry was heavy to be so lightly affected.

Lord Cawston seemed for a minute to hesitate, as if he hardly knew how to begin what he proposed to say to me. He fidgeted with the lace ruffles at his sleeve, and took up, and laid down, a seal with which he had just fastened a parchment envelope before him.

At length he plunged into the matter in hand.

"I understand, Captain Lesterne, that Lieutenant-General Churchill is expected at Ash House to-night?"

"That is so, my lord. I intend returning in time to receive him."

"As I informed you just now, at the end of dinner, I have a note which I wish you to convey to

my lord, but which on no account is to reach other hands. I am, in fact, placing the greatest confidence in your discretion and honour by making you the bearer of this missive." As Lord Cawston spoke he took up the sealed envelope from the table and showed me the superscription. It was addressed to :

The Lieutenant-General,  
Lord Churchill,  
At Ash House.

"The lives of men, Mr. Equerry, are inclosed within this envelope. I trust it to your honour, and to that of his lordship."

The vision of Lady Lettice laying her fingers on my arm, and the recollection of her impassioned feeling obtruded on my mind at this moment, to the exclusion of everything else.

"My lord," I said, "is it absolutely necessary that this letter should be conveyed at all?"

"I do not understand you," the Earl replied, drawing himself up haughtily.

I was not to be daunted now that I had gone so far. "You have asked me, my lord, to be your messenger, and you have explained that the lives of men may be in jeopardy, if this paper should fall into other hands, or if either Lord Churchill or I were to betray the trust you are reposing in us."

As I said these words my face was turned partly away. I spoke diffidently, and my gaze was directed beyond Lord Cawston's chair to the tapestry at the back of the room. Once again I fancied that it moved. In spite of my preoccupation some sub-

consciousness told me that the affair was remarkable. I could understand that when I opened and shut the door a draught might have been occasioned in conjunction with some loophole in the external wall beyond the tapestry, but now the air of the room was still—so still that it seemed I could hear the beating of my own heart. Nevertheless, so pre-occupied was I with the remonstrance that I was about to offer to the Earl, and the effect it might have upon him, that I paid but little attention to what otherwise would have exercised my reasoning powers to a greater extent. I went on speaking more rapidly :

"I can answer for my master, and for myself. I, at any rate, will convey the missive to the best of my ability, if your lordship decides to send it; at the same time, as you have so far taken me into your confidence, and have admitted me to the great honour of your acquaintance and hospitality, I trust that you will permit me to offer my earnest solicitation that your lordship will consider the matter on all sides before allowing this document, about the contents of which, of course, I know nothing, to pass from your hands."

The Earl drummed on the table with his knuckles.

"Is it likely, Captain Lesterne, that I should have penned such a document, signed, and sealed it, without the greatest deliberation? Great heavens! deliberation is not the word for it. Anxiety is a better one. It is wrung from my very heart's blood."

He broke off, as if the stress of his feelings prevented him from saying more.

"My lord, forgive me. You have an ancient name,

great estates and position, a son with whom I fenced only this afternoon, an heir worthy of your race. You have a daughter whom I have just left——”

The Earl interrupted, with a flash in his eyes of quick appreciation.

“Ah, sir!” he cried, “you have given away your secret. This is the source of your unsolicited advice. This is the inspiration of your opposition! My daughter, the Lady Lettice! What she cannot affect with me directly, she is striving to accomplish indirectly, by you.”

“A woman, my lord, I take it, although I know but little of the subject, has her weapons. After all, it is the woman who suffers from what man decides, in the long run.”

“I love my daughter, as I loved her mother before her,” the Earl exclaimed, with deep emotion in his tones, “but I cannot let her opinions weigh with me in a matter of this moment. What can a woman know of the affairs of State? Of kingdoms in the balance? Of kings weighed and found wanting? A woman’s province is the embroidery-frame and the still-room; the management, when she is old enough, of a household, be it castle or cottage. Politics and war are outside her province. Men must decide these matters for themselves.”

I felt the truth of much that had been said, and could only reiterate, “Nevertheless the woman suffers, my lord, suffers more than we do, through us and for us.”

The Earl got up, perhaps stung by the truth of my words, and began to pace the apartment with rapid strides. As he neared the tapestry I saw it

move again. I was now convinced that it had been bulging out, that some one was listening behind it, and, hearing the approach of the Earl's step, had moved back. I was about to jump up and run to the place, but a moment's judgment restrained me. If I was right that there was a hidden listener, my approach, following upon that of the Earl, would only frighten him away. Doubtless he had secured a means of escape before concealing himself. I did not know the way to the back of the tapestry, and to acquaint the Earl with what I had observed and suspected would take time, especially in his pre-occupation. I determined to await another opportunity, when the man, whoever he was, should be lulled into a sense of security, so that he might be captured more easily.

Lord Cawston paced up and down for some minutes without speaking, and then he sat down in his chair once more.

"I thank you, Mr. Equerry," he said, "for what you have advanced with respect to this matter, but I cannot yield to the warning and advice which you have thought fit to offer. Matters have reached a crisis which no longer admits that an honest man and one who loves his country, and, above all, his faith, should stand idly by. You have referred to my position ; it is that which in honour compels me to take my place in the van of this movement."

As has been said, the Earl's back was towards the tapestry, so that any one behind that thick curtain, who wished to hear what Lord Cawston was saying, would naturally come as near to him as possible. As I had anticipated, after the Earl had resumed his

seat the tapestry once more betrayed to my quickened perceptions the fact that there was a man leaning against it. I made a motion with my fingers to my lips to impose silence. Then I ran rapidly and as lightly as possible across the intervening space. Lord Cawston moved his chair involuntarily, in surprise at my action, and this sound helped me by covering the slight noise of my approach. I flung myself down on my knees, and, lifting the tapestry from below, grabbed with both hands into the space beyond. It was a chance action which the result justified. I seized the upper part of a booted-leg. There was a muffled cry, and I found myself struggling with some one striving to fling off my hands and to free himself from my clutches. I was determined, however, not to let go. Fortunately my adversary either had no weapon, or was afraid of hurting himself instead of me in the darkness. A dagger, struck downwards at this moment, would have inflicted a serious injury, and no doubt effected the escape of the man I had seized. Using all the strength of which I was master, I dragged the unseen listener under the edge of the tapestry into the room. His head struck the wall behind him as he fell, and his struggles ceased for a moment in consequence. The Earl had now come to my side, and he helped me to lift up the fallen man. The latter seemed to be unconscious, and we placed him temporarily on an oak settee which stood against the wall.

The stranger's dress was that of a tradesman or superior bagman. He wore a brown coat, over a tunic of the same hue fitting tightly to his body, and riding-boots almost to his thighs. With his hat on

he might easily have been mistaken for an English traveller in silks and cottons, but his beaver having fallen off in the struggle, his real nationality was apparent enough. The pointed beard and narrow face were emphatically French.

After we had laid the insensible form of this man on the settee, Lord Cawston beckoned me to follow him to the other end of the compartment.

"This is what is going on," he remarked bitterly, "all over the country. And this is the justification of my letter to Lord Churchill and all that lies behind it. The King of France is at the bottom of all this; he is the real ruler of England, and James is his cat's paw. How long, I ask you, Mr. Equerry, are we to submit our necks to this villainy?"

"Monmouth died on the scaffold, after cringing to James for the mercy which was denied him." I was still defending, as best I could, the side Lady Lettice had commended to me, but, I must own now, in a half-hearted fashion. My blood boiled to think that an English nobleman should be spied upon in his own house, by a man of an alien race, at the bidding of an alien King. Not that an English spy would have been any more attractive to my ideas.

"Ah! Monmouth," the Earl answered; "that was a different matter. William is no upstart, the child of a kitchen wench, at any rate. And Mary is a Princess of our own Royal House. If James forfeits the throne by his own insane acts it will be to one nearest him in kin and blood."

"But if William fails, as the Duke failed before him, his superior claim and race will not benefit

those who have pinned their faith to his cause, but rather the reverse."

The Earl shrugged his shoulders. "We must risk something," he said, "to gain all, and who is safe in any case while that is going on?" He pointed to the form at the end of the room, in which some sense of movement seemed to be now showing itself.

Lord Cawston bent his lips nearer to my ear.

"The man whom you so cleverly captured, Captain Lesterne, seems to be rousing. How much did he hear, think you, of our conversation?"

"Not much, I believe, my lord, as your back was to the tapestry, and the material itself is thick enough to deaden voices, but enough, I should say, to make him dangerous."

"My ancestors," the Earl remarked grimly, "would have made short work of him. He would have been placed on a rack in a dungeon of the Castle, and made to yield up his secrets, and then swung from one of the battlements of the tower, as a warning to his like."

The Earl seemed to be hesitating as to what he should do. I ventured a suggestion.

"Those same dungeons, my lord, or if too damp, the strong room of the Castle, might serve to cool the good man's ardour on behalf of his master, if he remained in them for a while."

"It is a good suggestion," the Earl answered, "only one hardly knows whom to trust with the secret that we have a prisoner."

"It will be safer to convey him ourselves to the strong room, my lord. Then your body-servant, Godstone, could be depended upon, surely, to see to

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him later, until such time that you think fit to let him go free."

The Earl adopted this advice, and together we carried it out. The spy, who was a man, I should judge, between thirty and forty years old, was by this time able to walk with assistance. I had taken from him the only weapon he seemed to possess, a long stiletto, or thin dagger, of Italian workmanship which we found under his tunic, in a pocket at the back made on purpose. Any questions we asked were answered in an incoherent fashion, but whether from confusion of ideas produced by the fall I had given him, or shammed to hide his thoughts, it was impossible to tell.

We deposited him in the strong room, and after taking care there was no means of exit, locked the door behind us. We met no one by the way, most of the servants being engaged with their supper. As we were returning the sound of a bell from the entrance struck upon our ears. "Who can have come at this time?" the Earl asked.

Those were days in which an unexpected messenger might prove a portent.

I could make no suggestion.

## CHAPTER III

### NEWS

THE Earl, hearing voices, went down the great staircase. He had apparently forgotten my existence in his curiosity and excitement as to what the advent of a stranger or, at any rate, a new arrival might mean.

I stood irresolute, not knowing quite whether to follow him, or to remain where I was. Lord Cawston had not given me his final instructions with regard to the letter he had written to General Churchill. Our conversation had been interrupted by my discovery of the man behind the tapestry. The letter had been left on the Earl's table. It was time that I returned homeward. I did not wish my master to arrive at Ash House before me. Churchill was generally impatient of delay, and, judging by past experience, it was almost certain that he would have something for me to do immediately on his arrival. On the other hand I could not well leave Cawston Castle until I had received its master's final directions.

I waited to see whether the Earl would come back. I could hear his voice, which was singularly deep, coming from the direction of the great entrance-hall; other tones mingled with his by way of response.

After a while the voices became less distinct. I guessed that my lord was taking his companion to the room in which he settled the business of his estate, and not infrequently administered justice. This was on the ground floor, in the newest part of the Castle.

At this juncture I became conscious of some one approaching, and the Lady Lettice came out of the half dark of the passage, on to the top of the stairway where I was standing. During the time that I had been with the Earl in his closet, a servant had lighted lamps at various intervals throughout the building, but the passages were so tortuous, and the lights so dim, that the lamps served rather to emphasise the gloom than to dispel it.

For various reasons, some of them defined and some undefined, which I could hardly account for to myself, I was delighted that the Lady Lettice should have come to me at this moment, yet I had parted from her barely half an hour ago.

"Where is my father?" she asked.

"There was a ring at the bell, and the Earl left me to speak to some man, with whom I have since heard him talking in the hall."

Lady Lettice stamped her foot. "I hate these messengers," she cried. "They only serve to disturb my father. I would that I could lock him up for a month away from every one."

She looked wondrously pretty in her mingled anxiety and irritation.

"I am afraid that is beyond our power."

"What did my father decide about the letter? Did you use your influence with him?"

"I did all I could. Lord Cawston was, I think, a little annoyed with me at first for tendering my advice——"

"And then?" she cried eagerly.

"We were interrupted. There was a man hiding behind the tapestry; he incautiously moved it, and I dragged him out."

The Lady Lettice laid her hand upon her heart as if to still its furious beating.

"Ah!" she cried; "the coils, the coils! Father Petre is at the back of this, as he is of everything in England to-day. Before long he will weave about us all the web of evidence, and my father will pay the penalty." She turned away from me and wrung her hands. "My God!" she cried; "what is a woman to do?"

I longed to, and yet dared not, place my arms about her shoulders, and give her what little strength and comfort my support could bring.

Whether I loved the Lady Lettice or not I could not have told my dearest friend. She had so many moods which now attracted, now seemed to put me further from her. I had had time and opportunity to study her during the last two months, such as was never afforded me as regards any woman since as a mere stripling I had been taken into the service of John Churchill. From that moment onwards his will had been my first consideration, and except for the brief time which had been occupied by the serious illness of my dear father, and his final passing from this world, all my thoughts had been centred on performing those offices which that great Captain and leader of men required of me.

The Lady Lettice had come into my life at a time when I had leisure to be at her beck-and-call. No one so circumstanced could have failed to feel for her, at the least, a keen interest. The experience was like watching all the moods of an English summer—at one time smiling at the sunshine, at another with the soft mist of rain blurring the landscape. There was also the link between us which comes from the sympathy of sharing in a common feeling. We were both pawns in a game in which no one could take part without being greatly stirred—a game in which a crown was the prize, and men's lives were like to pay forfeit in case of defeat. In my humble way I shared likewise with the Lady Lettice, not merely a place in the movement itself, but also in the personal outlook with which we both regarded it. My views were those, very naturally, of him from whom I had learnt all I knew of the trade of war, and of that other study whichmingles so largely with it, that of politics, or perhaps I should say state-craft. Our affections were with the King actually in possession of the crown, whereas our love alike for our religion and for that liberty, which is ever near the heart of all true Englishmen, influenced us strongly in the opposite direction.

John Churchill—I say it now with all the confidence begotten of intimate knowledge, and in face of almost universal detraction, born to a great extent of jealousy—was at this period, and had been for some time previously, in two minds. His was not the attitude, so often ascribed to him by his enemies, of trying to make the most of himself in one market or the other, offering his great abilities, and enormous

influence with the soldiery, to the highest bidder. His wish was to serve James faithfully, to devote himself to him whole-heartedly, as he had done in the days when the Prince could be regarded comparatively as a private individual, rather than as the Chief of the greatest State in the world. But the acts of the King had alienated, if not the affections, at any rate the political sympathies, and with them the personal devotion of my master.

Gradually, as James revealed his policy, and showed the obstinate workings of his narrow mind, Churchill was compelled to be convinced that very soon not a single office, or employment of any importance in the realm, would be open to an adherent of the Protestant Faith. To be governed by James was one thing, to be ruled by Father Petre, the power behind the throne, was quite another.

In this transition of feeling I naturally shared. Men like the Earl of Cawston went a step further, never having had that personal attachment to King James which for a time held back the General.

How deeply Churchill was stirred by these conflicting feelings, at this period, I know full well. Sometimes he would seem to lean more to the one party, and again, influenced by some new fact, he would be led towards the other. This balance of mind on his part was but little understood, and he consequently was mistrusted in both camps.

As I am relating to a great extent things absolutely unknown even to those in the inner circle of the happenings of those times, I think it right to state plainly the undercurrents of feeling,

which obtained at this critical moment in the history of England, namely, in October, 1688. I shall be telling shortly what was the determining influence which decided General Churchill's actions, but I would wish to make it quite clear, before doing so, that his determination was in doubt right up to the moment at which we have now arrived.

The secret history I am about to give to the world will, I think, show to all honest men that Churchill's action at this juncture could not have been other than it was.

The Lady Lettice and I had discussed affairs again and again. Our sympathy was in complete accord, except that she brought to the consideration of current politics feelings which did not obtain in my case. The lives of those she loved most were in jeopardy. The terrible punishment that had fallen on Monmouth's ill-fated following was still in the air. Jeffreys might have to do again on a larger scale, and on a much higher social plane, what he had already accomplished in a restricted sphere, and on a lower scale, as regards Monmouth's supporters.

The Lady Lettice had her back to me still. Her shoulders were heaving with an emotion which she was striving unavailingly to repress. She was not one lightly to abandon her self-control, and I could read beneath this scene the story of days of anxiety and nights of restless watchfulness. I touched her on the soft flesh of her rounded arm. She turned to me, her eyes still full of tears.

"You trust me, Lady Lettice," I said, "to do what man can do—to be your father's friend, and yours?"

She brushed back her tears with a dainty lace handkerchief, and looking me full in the face, answered, "Yes, I do trust you, Captain Lesterne, else should I not speak as I have spoken, or show to you what I have shown to no one else." She tossed her head with something of her old defiant air. "Do you think I would let my father know, or Godfrey, how weak I am at times? Why I show the weaker side to you I cannot tell."

She looked at me as if she were working out a problem, and I—I could not solve it for her. Perhaps there is no solution of a woman's why, of a girl's strange waywardness; no solution except her instinct, which is finer than reason.

"I am an honest man," I said, "searching for the right thing to say, and not finding it."

She laughed; her mood had changed. "Oh, yes! you are honest enough, Mr. Equerry, no one ever doubted that, and you have a pretty trick of fence, as you showed my brother this afternoon, but you are stupid, you know; perhaps that was why my Lord Churchill made you his equerry."

Here again the Lady Lettice eluded me.

"I fail to understand you," I said. Her moods changed so rapidly that I was dazzled.

"Don't you?" she said, and curtesied. "I will read you that riddle by another. My Lord Churchill is not stupid, is he? And as to honest?" she hummed a little tune, which she was wont to play as an interlude on her spinet. I felt myself turning hot. I like not that my master should be lightly spoken of, but my Lady Lettice, as I well knew,

was no respecter of persons, neither did she choose always to control her tongue.

How I might have answered I know not, for at this moment we again heard the voices from below. They were those of the Earl and his visitor. The two men were evidently returning from the audience hall. Lord Cawston called out to Godstone to give the stranger some refreshment, ere he went on his way again.

The Lady Lettice had come close to me. We were both standing at the head of the stairway, listening with all our ears. As she turned and spoke to me I could feel her soft breath on my cheek. Her lips were very near to mine. Again I felt that strange sensation in my blood which she had quickened in me earlier in the afternoon. Her womanhood touched my manhood, yet I could not analyse what it meant.

She was not thinking of me; at any rate, if at all, only indirectly.

"My father's voice shows that he is agitated in some way by the news he has received. I pray God that it may have been good, although I had much rather it had been neither good nor bad."

Directly after this we saw Lord Cawston coming up the staircase. He was walking with head bowed and with the step of an old man. The Earl was not aware that anyone was watching him.

The Lady Lettice pressed my hand. She even hurt me with her soft fingers.

"Bad," she whispered. "The news is bad. God help us all! My father's face is that of a stricken man."

As she spoke the Earl looked up. The Castle was so silent that even the whisper of Lady Lettice's voice may have reached his ears.

The Earl paused. He seemed to have been thinking of something which had not struck him before. He looked from his daughter to me, and from me back again to his daughter. His eyes seemed to be asking a question, which his brain was answering for itself.

After a pause, during which we were all still hardly breathing, Lord Cawston came on again. We gave back from the top of the stairs as he approached. His lips showed his agitation, although he was using all his efforts to control them.

"I trust to your friendship, Captain Lesterne, and to that of your master, on behalf of my children, if—if—"

The Earl did not finish the sentence, but I understood.

"I would give my life willingly, my lord," I answered, "in your service, and in theirs."

## CHAPTER IV

### CONSTERNATION

I HARDLY dared to look at the Lady Lettice when her father spoke those significant words as to my friendship for his son and daughter, with that still more significant omission which was attached to it. Clearly the Earl thought that he himself might be arrested at any moment, and his life in jeopardy, at the mercy of a man to whom the quality was unknown.

When I did fix my eyes on the girl's face, I was surprised to read what I did there. She had linked her arm in that of her father, and, instead of fear, a high courage shone in her eyes as she listed them to his. All the feelings that she had expressed to me were banished by her strong will, and determination to help her father in the emergency.

Once again I was surprised, and in the surprise was mingled a strand of great admiration. A woman's courage rises sometimes when a man's would fall. She can meet the contingency of the unexpected and the unknown, when, in doing so, she helps one she loves. Man, on the other hand, is more self-centred—at least, so it seems to me. He lacks that wonderful element which buoys a woman up in

the great issues of life. He has courage to face the tangible, the direct; the unknown and intangible undermine his resources. Woman cares little for these distinctions. A brave woman, I mean. She may collapse afterwards, but at the moment she rises to meet an emergency, most of all when she sees the men about her weaken.

"Come," the Lady Lettice said, "into my boudoir. You can tell us the news there, whatever it is, dear father; it always seems worse before you tell it than when others share it with you."

The Earl turned towards the newer part of the building, under the influence of his daughter's guiding arm. He seemed to be bewildered, hardly capable of asserting his own will. The girl by a gesture invited me to follow. I felt I could not leave them at this moment, although I was overdue to start for Ash House. I comforted myself with the reflection that by remaining I might be doing my master a service. For, assuredly, whatever news the Earl had received would be of vital importance to Lord Churchill.

Consequently, I followed the Earl and Lady Lettice with the less reluctance that I felt I was doing my duty as well. Nothing had been disturbed in it since I left it last. The game of chess was still on the board. The red king was being hemmed in by the white forces. I knew that the Lady Lettice had dubbed James II. the red king ever since his Grace of Monmouth had perished on the scaffold, and Jeffreys had stained all the West Country with a lurid hue never to be effaced.

Thoughts like these were at the back of my mind,

and certainly they suggested themselves likewise to the mistress of the apartment. With an impatient gesture she swept the men from the board and put them out of sight. The parable she had fashioned out of her own mind was disturbing to her nerves under present circumstances. The Earl saw nothing of all this by-play. He was too much absorbed in the news he had to tell.

He sank heavily on to a chair, as if glad of some support. I had left the door ajar behind me. His eye noticed it. He almost spoke with irritation, a thing unusual to him.

"Shut the door, Captain Lesterne. In these days one does not know whom to trust, or who may be listening."

I did as I was bid, and then stood with my back to it. The Lady Lettice had taken up her position by her father's arm. She bent over him with an almost protecting air, which to me was both pathetic and attractive.

The Earl looked first at me and then at his daughter.

"The messenger who has just arrived at the Castle comes from the coast. He brings us terrible news as regards both our country and ourselves." He paused, as if gathering strength to say what was to follow. I advanced a step nearer. We neither of us spoke, but awaited the Earl's next remark in breathless suspense. "William started from Helvoetsluys on the 19th with a fine fleet. Prayers had been offered throughout the previous day for the success of the expedition. Our own Princess Mary was among the most fervent of the

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worshippers. The fleet was in three divisions, and started under a smiling sky and the most happy auspices. Alas! before twelve hours had passed all was changed. A great storm came on. The ships were dispersed; some of them wrecked. What happened to William himself and his frigate the *Brill*, my informant does not know. If the *Brill* was wrecked and William perished, the liberties of England—nay, the liberties of Europe—have fallen with him."

The Earl's head sank down on his chest as he seemed to be carrying out in meditation the picture his own words had painted. He thought of Louis the Great, no longer retarded by his great adversary William of Orange, carrying all before him abroad; he thought of James, no longer restrained by his apprehension as to what William would do, grinding the lives and liberties of Englishmen beneath his feet unchecked.

"How did the messenger who came to you, my lord, know all this?" the Lady Lettice asked.

Lord Cawston roused from his reverie, raised his head, and replied: "The man is an Englishman named Sterndale. He is the master of a small schooner which trades between Holland and Lyme-Regis. He has been a go-between on several occasions in these matters, having carried messages from the Hague to those nobles whose estates lie in the West, and from us back again to the Prince of Orange. His schooner was in advance of William's fleet. When the storm came on, the small vessel, by superior seamanship and long acquaintance with the route on the part of her master, managed to get

across the Channel. Master Sterndale, who is one with us in sympathy, thought it right that we should be informed of the disaster which had overtaken the expedition."

"Did you say that the Prince started on the nineteenth of this month?"

"Yes; but I do not see of what importance that is, if the fleet has been swept from the sea."

"To-day is the twenty-ninth," Lady Lettice remarked quietly. "How is it that the message has been so long in reaching us if Master Sterndale crossed the Channel so expeditiously?"

"He was driven somewhat out of his course, and landed in the end at Plymouth. Since then he has been to several of the leaders of our party, before coming to the Castle. Sterndale is now on his way back to Lyme-Regis, where the schooner is to meet him. At Axminster, where Sterndale lay last night, he heard confirmation of his own news from a traveller in silks, who had come down from the metropolis. James had been early informed of the disaster to William's fleet, and there were great rejoicings at Whitehall in consequence. Up to the very day that the Prince sailed the King would not believe the expedition would ever take place. His fear was great, when the news that all was ready, reached him. The relief was consequently of the deepest when he found, as he believed, that the winds and waves were fighting on his behalf. Master Sterndale informs me, that James has already taken measures to punish those who have committed themselves irretrievably on behalf of the claims of the Prince of Orange and his Consort. My name was

mentioned even in the parlour of the London Inn at Axminster."

Hitherto I had been silent. Now I stepped nearer to the Earl and said : "James is ever slow to strike. I cannot but believe that he will not be hasty on this occasion. There are those, as my master has often pointed out to me, high in office and near to the King's person, who would restrain him from action as long as possible. They have too much to lose themselves to welcome the idea of a public trial."

"That is true," Lord Cawston admitted, his brow clearing somewhat.

"Besides," I added, taking courage from the effect that I saw my words had produced on both the Earl and his daughter, "I have personally seen the Prince with my own eyes, as well as knowing him by reputation. Of all men living he is the most capable of turning defeat into victory. I do not believe that his ship was destroyed, or that the Prince's star has set. He is God's lieutenant, and will be protected to do the work entrusted to him."

I cannot tell what had come over me at this juncture ; it seemed as though I spoke words not my own, as if some inspiration had come upon me, with which my will had nothing to do. The Lady Lettice looked at me as if I stood to her in some new and unexpected light.

"I believe," she said to her father, "Captain Lesterne is right. I feel that William will triumph over all difficulties, and that he will yet come to England and free us from our bondage."

The Lady Lettice's remark struck me even then

as a curious one. Before, she had held back from taking William's part ; she had wished her father to be neutral ; she had even asked me to prevent him from committing himself one way or the other. Now, in the hour when all things seemed dark, and William's fortunes on the wane, her attitude was different. She hoped when others feared. She was prepared to support the Prince of Orange, even when her father was considering the advisability of securing his own safety by flight.

Once more the problem of womanhood in all its moods faced me, and proved insoluble to my halting brain.

The Earl rose, and I began to make my adieus. It would be necessary for me to gallop home as quickly as the state of the roads, and the darkness of the night rendered possible. Even now it was more than probable that Lord Churchill would have arrived at Ash House.

As we reached once more the head of the staircase, it occurred to me that the matter was still in doubt as to whether I should take the Earl's letter to my master or not. The news the former had just received might affect his wishes. My impression was that he had forgotten all about it. Important as the commission had appeared to him early in the evening, the recent disquieting information had occupied Lord Cawston's head, to the exclusion of everything else.

I turned to him.

"Am I to take your letter to General Churchill now, my lord ? "

The Earl considered for a moment before replying.

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"Yes, I think so, provided you tell him what has happened since I wrote it. It will rest with him to advise me as to what course I had better pursue. No man knows better than General Churchill what the King is likely to do, and, if any one is liable to arrest amongst the nobility of the West of England, I am assuredly a probable victim."

I could not help agreeing in this gloomy prognostication. We all three walked towards the old wing of the Castle. The Earl entered the closet first, followed by Lady Lettice; I brought up the rear. Hardly were we all within the apartment before Lord Cawston uttered an exclamation. He was walking towards the table on which the letter had rested. It was quite bare.

"Surely, we left the packet lying here when we took that man out of the room?"

"Yes, I am sure of it," I replied.

The Lady Lettice was engaged in looking under the table to see if the letter had dropped down. I helped her to search the floor of the room, but nothing resulted. We even went, candle in hand, behind the tapestry in a forlorn hope. There was something sinister about this mysterious disappearance of the letter. When we returned from our search, Lord Cawston was still standing by the table like a man dazed. He seemed incapable of movement.

"We cannot find it anywhere, my lord," I said.  
"Are you sure you did not take it up and place it in one of your pockets?"

The Earl shook his head, but looked, nevertheless. Beyond a lace kerchief, a snuff-box, and a dog-whip, nothing was produced.

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"We must question the servants, my lord," the Lady Lettice suggested to her father.

"You know well, child, that no one but Godstone is ever allowed to come to this room."

"Then let Godstone be summoned."

The Earl acquiesced. In a few minutes the old body-servant had come, in response to a call.

"I left a letter on this table an hour agone, before the messenger came who is now having supper in the buttery. I cannot find it. Can you tell us anything about it?"

"No, my lord," Godstone answered readily. "I have been into the room to replenish the fire, but did not look specially at the table. I certainly saw nothing upon it, my lord."

"Very well then, Godstone, you cannot help us." The Earl then told him about the prisoner he and I had locked into the strong-room. Godstone was directed to ascertain if the man had come to his full senses.

Left alone, Lord Cawston turned to me with deep anxiety expressed in his eyes and whole demeanour.

"The loss of this letter is most serious. It contained information which would be of great value to the King's advisers, and bring down on the heads of several men of the first quality summary vengeance." He struck his hands together. "Would that I had taken it up before I left the room!"

"I think that some explanation will yet be found of the loss of it," Lady Lettice put in. "I cannot believe that any one has stolen it from your closet, my lord."

"I should not have thought it possible this morning

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myself. But after Captain Lesterne's discovery of a man behind the tapestry, nothing that could happen would surprise me."

Hardly were the words out of his mouth when there came a knock at the door; Lord Cawston was destined to find that it was possible still to surprise him.

Godstone entered in obedience to Lady Lettice's instruction, for the Earl seemed incapable of giving a direction.

"The strong-room is empty, my lord. The prisoner must have escaped."

The Earl sat down and buried his face in his hands. This last mysterious blow had quite overwhelmed him. Neither Lady Lettice nor I could find anything consolatory or suggestive to say. Either the spy had an accomplice, who had effected his escape, or the door of the strong-room had not been actually fastened. The bolt might have been shot outside the staple instead of within it. I was quite certain the key had been turned in the lock, but had not ascertained whether the door was actually fastened.

After a long pause, during which nothing was said and no one moved, Lord Cawston looked up again. His face was white and drawn.

"It will be necessary for us to leave the Castle in the first light of dawn. Lettice, you will make arrangements and acquaint your brother. There is no safety for us here. We are surrounded by spies; only a rapid flight can save us."

Lady Lettice had turned away from her father, and I could see her eyes suffused with tears,

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"Courage," I said ; "let me know if possible where you go, and all a man can do will be done on your behalf."

"I know it," she said.

I bent down and kissed her hand. In a few minutes I was on horseback, galloping towards Ash House.

## CHAPTER V

### ON THE ROAD TO ASH

I ALWAYS find it easier to think on horseback. In this, I believe, I differ from most men. The very motion of the horse under me helps to quicken my understanding. As a rule my perceptions are somewhat slow to grasp a situation, although when an idea is fixed it is difficult to dislodge it from my brain. But riding with the wind about my ears and the sky overhead, problems which I should be slow to solve if I were walking, or sitting at the council table, arrange themselves readily for me without an effort.

That night, as I rode down the drive from Cawston Castle, I had my favourite horse Diomed under me. Diomed had taken the place in my affection occupied in earlier years by Sorrel, now enjoying a quiet old age in the paddock at Etherington Manor.

At Ash I kept four horses—Diomed and Sultan for my own use, with two heavy-weight carriers for my body-servants, Duncan Macalister and Donald Duvain. Diomed and Sultan were widely different in their characteristics. The former could be taught anything which it is possible for a horse to learn.

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Duncan Macalister had given the beautiful animal, which he had broken himself, the most careful training. It would stand still at a word, or, if called, it would come either to him or me ; although spirited, Diomed had a perfect temper, both for riding and in the stable. It also had a gift denied to some horses of seeing almost as well in the darkness as in the daylight. When riding him I could trust my horse to know whether a gate was open or shut, when I could see not a hand before me. Sultan, on the contrary, had none of these qualities. He would buck and kick when he came out fresh from the stall, and it required a rider of some nerve and judgment to master him. On the other hand, he had qualities Diomed lacked. He was a perfect warhorse. In a charge of cavalry he was irresistible. With splendid shoulders, strong neck, and sturdy legs, his high courage rose to any emergency. I can speak from experience that it inspired his rider.

I was glad to-night that Diomed was under me ; I wanted to unravel the tangled skein of my thoughts. For this purpose a horse, which lent itself to every mood of its rider, was the ideal animal. I left Cawston Castle under mental conditions which had never obtained in my life previously. The remarkable events of the last hour, the news from Holland, the agitation of the Earl, the scene with the spy behind the tapestry, the mysterious disappearance, first of the letter, then of the prisoner—these things alone were sufficient to fill my mind with a confused eddy of thought. But there was much more at the back of it which no one but myself can altogether understand or appreciate. Anxiety and misfortune, when

shared in common, bring men together in a few hours, to an extent which months of intercourse often fail to achieve.

Both the Lady Lettice and her father had turned to me in their stress of feeling. I felt that I had been admitted into the very recesses of their minds. I could do but little in response to the appeal which had been made to me. Even the one thing I had accomplished, namely, dragging the spy from his hiding-place, had been made abortive by his subsequent escape; yet I felt a sense of unreasoning elation. I understood what it was to feel that I inspired confidence in two people, whose opinion I valued next to that of my master. It gave me confidence in myself. It helped to overcome that natural diffidence, which has held me back when other men have gone to the front, not being similarly hampered.

The Lady Lettice had never seemed to me so beautiful. Her character, too, had never stood out so strongly in my regard as it did when I saw her disturbed, trustful, appealing. What exactly I felt for her I could not have told even to Diomed. I did not know it myself. I had never been in love, or even on the mysterious borderland of that passion, for which men will do and suffer so much.

The Earl had announced his determination to leave Cawston Castle the following morning, taking with him his son and daughter. The time of our intimate companionship was over. We might never be thrown together again in the quiet intercourse we had enjoyed during the last two months. The armoury at the Castle would no longer resound with

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the clash of steel on steel and the voice of a solitary onlooker encouraging both victor and vanquished. I should no longer ride by the side of the Lady Lettice through field, and lane, and spinney, she with a hooded hawk on her wrist, or teach her to throw her fly over the swift-flowing Axe. The walks on the terrace, the meals in the small dining-hall, the games of chess in the young mistress's own apartment, were all things of the past. One never knows how much simple pleasures mean to us, what a large part they fill in our lives, until some cataclysm takes place, and these minor joys are buried in the ruins.

I rode down the drive to the great gates which separated the park from the road, a matter of a mile and a half. The drive was well kept and made easy going for Diomed's feet. During that time I gave no attention to anything but the thoughts which surged about my brain. I could hardly understand the sense of loss and loneliness which I felt, as I rode through the wide-open gates into the highway. Much might happen, indeed, to my country, to the family at the Castle, to myself, before I passed again, if I ever did so, through that entrance.

It was eight o'clock, or a little after, as I struck into the high road. Nine miles separated me from Ash House. I ought to do the distance in a little over the hour. The going, for the greater part of the way, was by no means of the best. It had been almost pitch dark when I left the Castle, but now a crescent moon was making its influence apparent, the stars were coming out one by one, the planet Mars shone with its red light over a belt of trees against the skyline away to the west. For the

present I was able to keep Diomed at a fast trot, which covered the ground without tiring the horse in the slightest degree. We were on the coach-road from Axminster to Salisbury. A mile further on, however, I should have to strike into a cross-road leading in the direction of Ash House. Here it would be necessary to go more cautiously. A descent was made down one hill, at the foot of which lay a brook which emptied itself, some four miles further on, into the Axe. Beyond this stream was a somewhat steep ascent, then the road became easier again.

I congratulated myself that Diomed could see as well in the dark as in the light of day. For when I turned off the coach-road I had to pass through a natural avenue of trees,—very lovely in the daytime, when the sun shone full upon them in their yellow autumn dress, but at night sombre, shutting out all the light there was, making it difficult for a rider who had to guide his horse to choose his way. As for me, I simply dropped the reins on Diomed's neck and left that sagacious animal to take his own course.

It was as well that I did so.

I had traversed the greater part of the descent and was almost at the bottom. I could hear the voice of the brook as it rippled against the stones, which barred its progress here and there in the bed of the stream. At this point the road took a somewhat sharp turn. Beyond this angle was a precipitous bit, which even in the daytime had to be negotiated cautiously.

I was full of my own thoughts, when suddenly I

was nearly flung off the saddle by Diomed digging his four hoofs into the rocky surface of the road, and so stopping dead. This action on the part of the horse took me so much by surprise that it nearly upset my seat. Many animals will peck when they come to water, especially at night, but Diomed had none of these proclivities. I tried to urge him on. I even smote him sharply on the flank with my open hand in its thick gauntlet; neither whip nor spur had I ever used to Diomed, and although spurs were on my heel they were only for ornament—I did not make use of them even now.

Persuasion had no effect. Diomed moved uneasily from side to side, tossed his head, and I could just see against the darkness the white steam coming from his nostrils, but not an inch further would he advance. Then I became convinced that there was some obstacle in the way. I swung myself down from the saddle, and going to the horse's head, stepped forward cautiously. As I did so something tripped me up. Quick as lightning I caught at the obstacle, and so saved myself from tumbling headlong down the steep incline into the brook. A strong rope was fastened across the road about the height of a horse's knees.

Then it all flashed across me; what a fool I was not to have suspected something before! There came back to me in mental vision the strong, hard face of an apparently unconscious man. I had mishandled that man somewhat roughly; afterwards he had escaped from Cawston Castle. He knew perfectly which way I was going. This was his revenge. Had Diomed been other animal than he was—Sultan,

for instance—we should both have been flung headlong down the steep incline into the stream below. It was probable one or the other of us, perhaps both, would have been killed.

My blood boiled. I drew my dagger from its sheath and glared round into the darkness. It would have gone hardly with my treacherous foe had I caught him at this moment, but round me all was silent as the grave. Only the heavy breathing of Diomed struck upon my ears. It is a weird feeling, alone, as far as any human sympathy or companionship is concerned, at night. Add to this the fact that you are at the bottom of a ravine, having come within measurable distance of dire accident, if not of death itself. Picture the possibility of an unknown foe hidden near, waiting for the final catastrophe, and you may have some faint idea of what I was passing through at this moment. The thankfulness for my escape, and that of my horse, was swallowed up by the impotence of my longing for revenge.

The brook purled beneath my feet regardless of any human tragedy nigh at hand. I could stretch out my arm and touch the bole of the nearest tree. I could not see these sentinels, but there they had stood when this device for my overthrow was planned. So they remained. Somehow I resented it. I felt the lack of sympathy between Nature and man, its supposed master.

I waited perhaps a full five minutes—it seemed an hour—just listening, dagger in hand. Nothing came to break the silence; not even a dead leaf crackled to my feet.

"It must bide," I muttered to myself. "The time

will come when I shall exact an expiation for this act of treachery."

I stooped down and sawed the rope with my dagger until the strands broke. As I did so I realised how much I owed to my horse's extraordinary cunning in the darkness. Diomed had probably saved my life. I slipped the dagger back into its sheath, and taking the horse's head between my hands, caressed his nose and ears, stroking them. I think the beast knew I was thanking him. He opened his lips; I could feel them working, although I could not see them, and slipped my ungloved right hand between them. It was a caress Diomed gave only to two persons—myself and Duncan Macalister, who had broken and trained him.

I did not mount again till we reached the top of the hill, having crossed the stream side-by-side on the way. Then I moved down it, briskly, homewards. I was impatient to be back again at Ash House, to tell my master all that had happened.

Disturbed I might be, but I should find Churchill cool and calm, ready to meet all emergencies as they arose. My feelings were in a condition which most of all needed the remarkable confidence and rest of spirit he inspired. I was thinking of our meeting as I rode along in a kind of reverie. Suddenly I pulied Diomed up. I have been in too many campaigns not to have my ears alert for any unexpected sound, even when my brain is working far away from the conditions of the present.

The sound of horses' feet struck on my ear. Not a person had met me since I left the Castle. A short time before this, I had passed the fork of two roads,

one of them being that by which I had come. Doubtless the riders, whose horses' feet I now heard, had used the other. Were they, like myself, going to Ash House? I should soon know, for only a couple of yards further on was the lane, which terminated in the entrance to the enclosure of Lord Churchill's residence. If the unknown turned from the high road in that direction they must be coming to Ash. I guided Diomed to the grassy part which lay beneath the hedge, and then galloped on, knowing that the sound of his feet would be deadened by the soft sward.

I entered the lane and went up it a short distance; then waited.

## CHAPTER VI

### A GUEST AT ASH HOUSE

I THOUGHT it more than doubtful that the riders behind me knew of my proximity. The grass, at the side of the road had deadened the sound of my horse's feet since I last halted. I was in two minds as to whether to ride on to the house, and warn the inmates that strangers might be expected, or to turn to meet them and ascertain who were coming. It might, of course, have been Churchill himself, returning. I had, however, decided against this hypothesis, because there had been a distinct pause made at the point where the lane left the highway.

The General would have advanced all the more eagerly that he had come in touch with home. His devotion to his wife was the guiding star of his life. Whatever may be urged against my master as to other relationships, military and political, and these attacks are largely the products of narrow-minded jealousy, his worst enemy has never failed to acknowledge the loyalty and devotion of his love.

About these riders behind me there was nothing of the eagerness I have suggested. The pause I have referred to was that of doubt, of hesitation—

probably of question whether it were the right road to the place they sought.

In the end I decided for a middle course. I would ride on quietly into the great gateway at Ash, and there await the on-coming riders.

Ash House, as everyone knows, is built with a paved yard in front of it, surrounded by a high wall. The entrance to the courtyard was made by some iron gates of scroll-work, and beyond them was a groined roof, with rooms on either side and overhead, which formed the lodge. From the centre of this roof hung a large lamp which was always lighted at night. I felt that it would be an advantage to me to have this light to illumine the scene, in an interview with any strangers who might be coming.

It may seem strange that I should have decided to receive the visitors, but in doing so I was carrying out the orders which my master had given me. At this period of his life Lord Churchill was the centre of all eyes. He was the pivot upon which everything would turn when the crisis was reached, which all saw to be impending. Standing as he did midway between the two great parties in the State, one upholding the reigning King, the other supporting the claims of William of Orange; having in his hand supreme influence with the standing army which James, for the first time in English history, had formed; in addition those pre-eminent qualities, the brilliance of his intellect and the unflinching character of his courage—all these factors together combined to make Churchill the arbiter of the destinies of England, and through them, it may be said, of all Europe.

Consequently, to an obscure country house on the borders of Devon and Dorset came messengers of all kinds. Had Churchill opened his ear to them all he would have had but little time for aught else. My master trusted, at any rate, to my fidelity, and perhaps I may add a little to my discretion. Anyway, he had given instructions that, whoever might come to Ash, I was to interview him, or her, first.

It might be thought that as these happenings were so frequent I should not have paid special attention to the riders behind me. I cannot even now account for my mental attitude, even to myself, by any rules of reasoning. Perhaps it was due to the stress of all I had gone through that afternoon; perhaps it was the knowledge which I had gained from the Earl that great things were on foot, that most important news might be expected at any moment.

Whether this or that were the reason, or whether it was a sort of general instinct based on no reason at all, I felt assured that something of consequence depended on the advent of the riders, who were following hard upon my footsteps.

Hearing the sound of my horse, old Michael Gayden shuffled out from his narrow doorway to open half the gate. He had been lodge-keeper at Ash for nearly half a century. Michael doffed his cap as I rode up.

"Has my lord returned?" I inquired.

"Yes, Captain, he came back an hour agone, and has been asking for your honour."

"That will do, Michael! Leave the gate as it is for the present, there are others coming after me.

You can go to bed; I will see to locking it up securely."

Gayden was already half asleep, and with a "Thank you, sir," and a touch of his cap, retired as fast as his old legs could carry him.

I was left alone in the gateway. Diomed drooped his head and began nibbling the longer stalks of the grass which grew between the cobble stones. I had faced the horse round, away from the house, towards the lane.

The light of the great lamp shone at some little distance into the road. Then it was girt about with a circular shadow; beyond was darkness, all the greater by way of contrast. After two or three minutes, out of this blackness impenetrable to my eyes came a rider a little in front of two others. I started; I wished for a moment I had gone on and awaited the newcomers in the house. It was the sex of the rider which took me by surprise and upset my preconceived ideas.

I had expected a man. I saw a woman riding towards me. She must have seen me before I saw her. I was in the full light. She came to me out of the darkness. When I first saw her, her face was clouded under a heavy veil, but as she advanced into the gateway she flung back this covering with her gloved right hand, and at the same time slowed down her horse's canter to a walk. The beast was evidently tired. It bore traces of long and somewhat hard riding. There were foam flecks on its harness and on its fore quarters. The sides and legs were splashed with mud. When the rider pulled it up, with its head almost touching that of

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Diomed, the animal showed signs of extreme exhaustion.

I hardly know how I realised all these details. I think they came back upon me afterwards. At any rate, I paid no attention to them. My whole thoughts were concerned, not with the horse, but with its rider. Behind the woman who was in front rode another woman and a man, evidently servants. Neither did I give any attention, or pass a thought, to these. They were only the accessories, the background of a picture. The picture itself was so interesting, in a sense so absorbing, that it dominated all else.

The new arrival was a woman hardly past her girlhood. Not more than three and twenty at the most. She looked utterly weary, almost fit to drop from her saddle; yet her mien lost nothing of its dignity. She had an air of command about her which impressed me more than anything else. I am not sure whether a critic would pronounce her beautiful, but no one could deny the unusual character of her face or the brilliancy of her eyes. She was of an extreme pallor, not of a hue indicating ill-health, but possessed of an ivory whiteness of complexion, which I have never seen equalled in any other woman.

I sat tongue-tied. I had intended to interrogate the new arrival. I had even formed a sentence or two. My questions were forgotten. I was like an inexperienced schoolboy in an embarrassing situation. She looked me up and down coldly, with a scrutinising gaze. I felt myself flush. I wondered what was wrong with my dress. I had been through

the brook, and my cap had been disturbed by overhanging branches. Doubtless I had somewhat of a dishevelled appearance.

At length she spoke, with a hauteur to which I was little accustomed. Lady Churchill was wont to treat me with a certain familiarity, patronising me as if I were a son or a younger brother. I felt hotly that this stranger rather looked upon me as if I were a kind of upper servant. It nettled me; yet I knew not how to resent it. After a pause, she asked in clear, distinct tones, with a musical ring in them, but still with a note of command, "Is this Ash House, the residence of Lord Churchill?"

"It is, madam," I replied. It seemed as if I had nothing else to say—just an affirmative; that was all.

"And you," she said, "who seem to sit like an equestrian statue in this gateway?"

I detected a note of irony in her tone which nettled me not a little. I plucked up courage now to meet her on her own ground. I had just needed the spur of her barely concealed irony, if not contempt.

"I am Captain Lesterne, at your service, madam, equerry to the Lieutenant-General."

She smiled slightly, but what her thought was behind the smile I could not tell.

"I have heard of you, Mr. Equerry," she said. "The watch-dog, are you not, which wards off intrusive visitors from my lord's presence?"

"You seem to know our ways at Ash, madam, in spite of the fact that your face is strange to me."

She almost laughed. The smile before had not been mirthful, but now for a moment her eyes

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danced. It added softness to a face which had lacked it before.

"Do you think I should come so far, and riding so hard that both horse and its mistress are weary, without first inquiring about the geography of the land I was bound for, or the people I was like to meet?"

When she spoke of her fatigue and that of her horse, she patted the animal with affection. I liked her for it. It seemed to say that she had not ridden so hard without cause, or without consideration for the good beast that had evidently borne her well.

To love a horse is ever a passport to my regard.  
"I was not aware, madam, that my service to his lordship was known outside a very limited circle—"

"Perhaps I am speaking of that circle, Mr. Equestry," she interrupted, again with a little laugh. "But we delay. I should like, with your permission, to proceed. Even equestrian statues are removable on occasion."

I did not feel like a statue at that moment. Her irony stung me. I felt that she was treating me with a veiled insolence.

"I am under orders, madam, from my master. He instructs me to ascertain beforehand what visitors to Ash House want of him, and what is their passport to his presence."

"The General's orders are, it is well known, those of a man who likes to be obeyed, but in this case I fear he must forego that satisfaction. What I have to say is for his private ear alone."

"You will, at any rate, tell me, madam, whom I have the honour of addressing."

"I am afraid it would not convey anything to you, sir. The circle in which I am known is an even smaller one than that to which we have just referred, just as a woman naturally fills a less place in the world of politics than a man."

The lady's tone belied the humility of her speech. I was a trifle irritated, and I answered somewhat brusquely :

"Perhaps, madam, you will have the goodness to inform me what message I am to convey to Lord Churchill."

"You can say," she said with slow emphasis, "that someone has come to him on a matter of life and death. To Lord Churchill," she added, "it will not matter so much, as it would to some men, that the ambassador is a woman; at least, so report says."

"I will follow out your instructions, madam. In the meantime, let me conduct you to the house."

One of my body-servants, Duncan Macalister, was in readiness to take my horse. I swung myself down from the saddle, and proceeded to assist the lady in alighting. She was so stiff from long riding that for a minute or two she could not stand alone, and was perforce bound to accept my arm in support.

"I am afraid woman is but a poor sort of a messenger, after all. I find that a long time in the saddle does not agree with my frame."

She said this in a different tone from the one which she had employed before. I felt much more

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drawn to her, and as my man's strength helped to support her physically, the contact strengthened the feeling of sympathy.

"Now, I think, sir, I can stand alone."

She withdrew herself from my arm, but not altogether as if the assistance she had required had been unsatisfactory to her.

In the meantime the servant riding behind had done much the same for madam's woman. I gave certain directions to Macalister, and then conducted the newcomer into the house. For a few moments I had practically forgotten that I, too, had important news for Lord Churchill's ear. This last incident had absorbed my attention. Now the thought of Lord Cawston and the Lady Lettice obtruded itself upon my brain. I had promised to tell my master as soon as possible what the Earl had heard with reference to the fleet of William of Orange, and that he himself had decided to leave the Castle.

As the groom of the hall came forward to take my instructions, I turned to the lady at my side and said :

"I had omitted to say, madam, that I have not as yet seen Lord Churchill since his return home, and I have an important communication to make to him, which I am afraid must not be delayed. Will you allow me first to conduct you to Lady Churchill, and then, when I have stated my business, his lordship will doubtless receive you?"

At this moment the groom of the hall, bowing low, interrupted :

"I am sorry, sir, Lady Churchill is indisposed. The doctor has but now left her, and says that she

has taken a chill which will confine her to her apartment for some time."

I glanced at the unknown, wondering whether this intimation would disconcert her, at all, as it was certain that, arriving at this time of night, and in her condition of fatigue, she would be bound to sleep at Ash House. However, the lady seemed in no way put out; perhaps she even showed some slight indications of relief. Lady Churchill's reputation for courtesy, to those who failed to meet with her approval, was not considerable.

"Will you kindly find Mrs. Carder and ask her to give instructions, that a room be got ready for this lady and her woman." I bowed to madam. "In the meantime I will wait on Lord Churchill."

She acquiesced. I watched her walk up the great staircase, following the man-servant. I could not but be struck with the dignity and grace of her movements. I felt that she was a woman of breeding. As I stood watching, she turned round and gave me a smile. It almost seemed to me that she was not displeased to find my eyes watching her, and that I had not immediately left the hall. Yet, a quarter of an hour earlier, at the entrance gate, she had treated me as if I had been an upper servant. Between then and now my arm had been about her waist. She had felt the need and the resource of my man's strength.

Had these things anything to do with her smile?

## CHAPTER VII

### A GREAT MAN

I KNOCKED at the door of the room in which my master always transacted his affairs when at Ash. His clear voice bade me come in.

Churchill was writing at a desk. It was never an easy task with him. He preferred the sword to the pen. His attitude was clumsy. Seeing me, he laid down the writing materials and sat back in his chair. How much thought can pass through the mind in an instant, when the attention is specially concentrated! I looked at the General, and, not for the first time by any means, admired him exceedingly. Of great dignity both in mien and appearance, he was also singularly handsome. Just thirty-eight years old at this time, he was in the prime of his powers. His broad forehead, fine eyes, aquiline nose, and strong chin made up a face which inspired men with confidence and women with admiration.

But this was not what especially struck me at this moment—I was too familiar with it. It was rather the thought that, of all the men I have ever seen, John Churchill was the least moved by any stress of emergency. In the height of battle, in the storming of a strong city, in the reception of news of the most

momentous character, Churchill was always the same. His eye never flinched, his colour never varied ; he might have been a passive spectator in the great drama of life instead of being a protagonist. It was this quality, unique in my experience, which made Churchill great even more than anything he actually achieved.

" You have been delayed, Lesterne ? "

" Yes, my lord," I answered ; " there have been strange doings at Cawston Castle, and the Earl has had disquieting news from abroad."

As I spoke I stood at the table, my hands resting upon it. Churchill surveyed me with a calm gaze.

" You shall tell me all you have to report in a moment. But first, I fancy I heard voices in the courtyard, as well as the tramp of several horses ? "

" Yes, my lord ; a messenger has arrived who wishes an audience."

" His name ? "

" It's a woman, my lord."

Churchill lifted his eyebrows. " She declines to give her name ? "

I wondered how he knew.

" Yes, my lord."

He smiled. " It is a woman's way of enhancing her value, and that of her message. She likes to surround herself with an air of mystery."

He took out a jewelled snuff-box, and helped himself to a pinch. Then he dusted some loose snuff off his coat. " It gets a little wearisome after a while." He looked at me with a gleam in his eyes. " I suppose it impressed you, Lesterne ?—you are younger than I am."

I smiled in response, but said nothing ; what could I say ?

" Young, and pretty ? Did that impress you also ? "

I looked sharply at the General, but could read nothing in his eyes. No one ever could, unless Churchill meant them to do so. I reflected that the windows of the room we were in looked out into the courtyard. Had my master, roused by the sound of horses' feet and of the voices, gone to the casement and looked out ? I remembered that little support I had been obliged to give owing to the stiffness of the messenger's limbs. Had Churchill misinterpreted that action on my part ?

" The lady seemed to have come a long distance. She was quite unable to stand when first she alighted at the door."

" They sometimes suffer from that disability when a handsome young man is there to render assistance. However, let that be. Time presses, and I must hear your news."

I told him the story of the happenings at Cawston Castle. The General listened without moving a muscle ; except that his eyes never left my face, he might have been barely interested, so impassive was his countenance. When I came to the part about the letter to himself having disappeared, he said :

" Lord Cawston is a dangerous man to his friends. Honesty without caution is a quality which does not tend for safety, when affairs are as they are in England at the present time. If James had his way, and was strong enough to get it, some of Lord Cawston's friends might rue this afternoon's work."

"I am afraid I was to blame too, my lord, not to have seen that the letter was duly placed in safe keeping."

Churchill nodded. "Yes, a little of that, too."

"I am distressed that any oversight on my part should have brought about a risk to any one. Before we discovered that the letter had been abstracted, a messenger reached Cawston Castle with tidings which greatly upset the Earl."

"He came from the coast?"

I bowed: Churchill's omniscience surprised me even, conscious as I was of his wonderful powers.

"The fleet of the Prince of Orange has been dispersed by a storm, and the Prince himself has had to put back to the coast of Holland."

"Exactly, sir," I said. "That was the message the chapman brought to Cawston Castle." I was surprised alike at Churchill's early information and the matter-of-fact way in which he imparted it. The General was too deeply interested in affairs not to be stirred, but his marvellous self-control suppressed any indication of it.

I then related to my master the decision Lord Cawston had come to as to seeking a safer refuge, for a time, for himself and his family, and then told him my own adventure on the way back. He seemed more interested in this than in anything that had gone before.

"I am glad, Lesterne, the trick did not end in causing you to break your neck. I should have missed you sadly." Churchill spoke with truth, and sincerity was in his voice. He gave me an affectionate look. I felt, as I had done many times before, that

I would risk my life any time in his service. To his peers, my master may have seemed scheming and self-seeking; to those who served him, he had a charm of manner which rendered him a hero.

"Now," he said, "I think the lady who needed support will have rested herself, and may be shown in to deliver her message."

I made a movement as if to retire, but he motioned me to a chair at his side. "I may want you to take down some notes. My fingers are stiff, and my handling of the pen is at all times awkward." He touched a small gong on the table. Hardly had he done so before his own special body-servant, Dix, made his appearance. He must have been waiting in the ante-chamber.

Dix had the gift, the most valuable in a servant next to honesty, and he had that too, of always being at hand when he was wanted. From his master he had learnt impassivity. He was silent, swift, intelligent, obedient.

"A lady has come to the house seeking an audience with me. You can show her in, if she has sufficiently recovered from the fatigues of her journey."

Dix glided from the room.

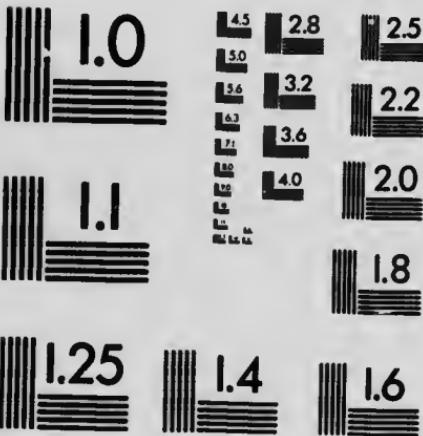
In three or four minutes he threw open the door. Without any announcement having been made, madam entered. She curtsied to Churchill, who rose to receive her; at the same time she cast a swift glance in my direction, as I too stood up to hand her a chair.

She had certainly availed herself of the opportunity to remove all travel stains from her dress, and to make herself generally presentable to a man's eye.



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I was again struck with her commanding beauty. Now the glory of her hair, which was of a golden straw colour, was no longer obscured by her hat and veil. It was gathered up into a corona on her head, with a single diamond star in the centre, two tresses escaping from it and falling upon her shoulders. Round her neck was a broad velvet band with another diamond brooch fastening it.

"Take a seat, madam," was Churchill's invitation.

"My instructions were to see your lordship alone."

"I have no secrets, madam, from my friend and secretary. You may regard him as discreet as the Egyptian Sphinx and as silent as one of Pharaoh's tombs. In addition, Captain Lesterne may be of use, if there is anything to be taken down."

She acquiesced. And I thought not altogether unwillingly.

"I am come from Count Zulestein, my lord."

Zulestein was cousin to the Prince of Orange and his representative in London at this period. Churchill and I knew him well.

"You have some credentials, madam, I presume?"

She took from her pocket a small purse, and out of it drew a piece of paper which she handed to Churchill. I did not see the document, but it evidently contained only a few words. Churchill looked at the signature with close scrutiny. Although a bad writer himself, he had the gift of recognising the penmanship of men whose writing he had seen. No forgery, in an age when such were prevalent, ever passed his eye undiscovered.

"This is the Count's writing. You may proceed, madam."

She looked my master full in the face. "The Count bids me tell you that William's first attempt to cross over to England has failed. He was beaten back by a storm, and some of his ships were wrecked."

"I know it, madam. He will come, nevertheless."

She went on with steady voice, not in the least disconcerted :

"The Count bids me tell you, my lord, that the King has decided to send the men he fears most to the Tower, and failing their submission, to the block. James never believed until now that his nephew would really start on this expedition. Since he has been compelled to believe it by the actual facts of its occurrence, James has been moved to take strong steps at home."

"The names of those leaders who are to be arrested?"

He asked the question as if it were of the smallest possible moment. Nevertheless his eyes searched her face.

"John Churchill's heads the list. His influence with the army is feared."

Churchill smiled. Once more he took snuff. I was listening with breathless attention. If what this woman said was true, the effect on my master might be enormous. As I have said before, I knew him to be hesitating, his friendship, even affection, for James on the one hand, and his loyalty to the liberties of England and to the Protestant Faith on the other, keeping the balance even. If James struck the first blow, Churchill's mind would be made up. Of that I felt sure. I looked at madam. She was watching

Churchill, seeking to read in his face the results of her communication. It was the first time she had ever been in the General's presence. She deemed him as other men, an open book for a woman's insight and quick intelligence to read.

I saw her baffled. It amused me. I felt myself spectator in a game of fence, and I knew that one of the combatants was a master of the art, quick to take advantage of his opponent's lack of skill, slow to exhibit his own method of fighting.

I asked myself, What was this woman's object? Zulestein did not love my master—not one of William's environment did. They partly mistrusted him, partly were jealous of him. It was not, then, for Churchill's sake that this lady had ridden so far and so fast. It must be for their own.

The General held in his hand the balance of fate. If he cast the weight of his sword into the scale on William's side, the throne of James would be shaken to its foundations. The small army on Hounslow Heath regarded Churchill as a hero and their natural leader. The regiments of cavalry scattered at various points in the garrison towns had served under Churchill at various times. They would be largely influenced by his decision. On the other hand, if my master supported the existing Government, William's expedition, if it ever reached these shores, was like to meet the same fate as that of Monmouth. In fact, the Protestant Duke had an element which made for success and was denied to the Prince of Orange. He was at any rate an Englishman. His manner, too, attracted, while that of William repelled, cold, taciturn, silent.

"Tell me another name, madam."

"Compton's."

"The Bishop of London. Why is he chosen?"

"As the most active spirit in the Church."

"Why not Burnet?"

"The King does not fear him."

I saw that my master was testing her information by his own knowledge of the state of affairs. He was evidently satisfied.

"Compton is under the King's hand. He can arrest him at once."

Madam eyed my master for a minute or two before she spoke. I think she wished her words to have their due effect.

"You are to come first, my lord."

"How did Zulestein know all this?" Churchill asked.

"He had it from Sunderland."

"Did Sunderland ask the Count to send and warn me?"

"I did not hear so. I believe it was my uncle's own initiative."

"Your uncle?" Churchill inquired with some surprise in his tone. "I took you to be an English-woman."

"I am, on my father's side. He was a Lisle. My mother was the Count's sister."

"A Lisle? A relation of Lady Alice Lisle who was—"

"Exactly," she replied between set lips, and with something in her voice which made me turn cold.

"Alice Lisle was my father's sister-in-law."

"That is why you do not love King James?"

"That is why I do not love King James."

I wished now that Churchill had not asked me to be present at the interview. I had had a very tiring day, and something in the cold hate, the underlying tragedy, lurking beneath these sentences gave me a feeling of nausea. The very walls seemed to echo, and re-echo, the tones in which this girl, for she was little more, echoed my master's words, using the same phrasing exactly, and yet giving to them a meaning all their own.

There was a pause of two or three minutes' duration. Churchill's face had hardened in sympathy with the set look on that of his *vis-à-vis*.

"You have reason on your side, Mistress Lisle."

"Yes, I have reason," she echoed again. "My aunt was the best woman in the world. She has gone to Paradise. James is left behind. He murdered her. Murdered her just as much as if he did it with his own hands. It is the first time in all history, that a King has soiled his hands to punish a woman for obeying the law of kindness. Alice Lisle gave food and shelter to a fugitive. She did not even know that he was Monmouth's man. James signed her death-warrant. Do you think I can ever forget that—forgive that?"

"Why did Zulestein send you to me?"

"He wanted a quick messenger, and a trusty one. What he had to tell could not be committed to writing. My uncle knew that neither distance nor fatigue would stop me if I could serve King James, that most Christian monarch."

Mistress Lisle spoke the last words in bitter irony.

"You want to take an answer back? Something more than thanks for the warning?"

"Yes," she replied.

"You are frank," he said; "you do not come to save me, but to hurt James?"

She smiled. "I would serve you if I could—now that I have seen you."

"I impress you more favourably than my reputation?"

"Men ever say hard things of those who are set on a pinnacle."

It struck me that this messenger was curiously open and undiplomatic in her way of putting things, of expressing her thoughts. I was also impressed with the impersonal way in which my master was treating the whole affair. As far as I could judge him, he seemed more interested in the human element—in the woman sitting there before him. Whether his liberty, possibly even his life, were in danger, was apparently a secondary question. Mistress Lisle herself was the object of his close scrutiny. Here again, no doubt, was a clue to much of Churchill's success. He read men, and I think I may add women, like an open page. He used this reading of them for his own ends. I say this in no disparaging sense; I do not mean selfish ends. But a man as he rises, and his power extends, has to select instruments to carry out his will. He can no longer depend upon doing things himself; he must employ agents.

As I read the story of human life and affairs, I seem to see that this is the gift of great men: to read character, to discern the springs of human nature, to

select that which is fittest to carry out the work they have in hand. Churchill, of all the men I have ever met, had this endowment in the most supreme degree. I have never known him make a mistake. Some part of this was due to his power of looking at things impersonally, placing his own feelings entirely on one side. He was not swayed by prejudice, he was not influenced by personal predilections. The man or woman who came under his observation was observed impartially. He was directing all his powers of scrutiny to Mistress Dorothy Lisle, to give her her full name, at this moment. Churchill saw her to be a rare instrument in the hands of those who were employing her.

History is never written in its entirety. Great results are tabulated. The main story is told, but the secret at the back of the obvious is withheld. We can all see the earth-cast, but the mole working beneath hides itself away from man's observation.

Churchill knew then, and I afterwards, that in this room at Ash House was a pivot. A thing small in itself, insignificant in one sense, but on which great things turn.

Churchill leant further forward. His eyes contracted a little, almost the only indication his face ever gave that he was more than usually interested. I looked at Mistress Lisle : the ivory whiteness of her face struck me again ; such was her usual hue that it became almost impossible for her to turn any paler, yet it seemed to me that she was a shade whiter than when she was first ushered into the apartment. I remembered her fatigue when I lifted her from the saddle. I was sorry that this interview should be

prolonged. I was sure it tried her strength to the utmost. Her youth appealed. I felt drawn to her by sympathy. Just now she had struck me cold, now I warmed to her. These transitions are, I suppose, the disabilities of lesser men. Churchill knew none of these things. Neither her youth nor her womanhood was a factor in his estimate of the situation. Yet the past of this girl, the record of her suffering, the slow building up of her hate ; all these things were far clearer to him than they were to me. There was this difference : I sympathised ; Churchill only recorded for his own ends.

" You have passed through a great deal, Mistress Lisle ? "

" Yes," she replied simply ; " there is hardly anything I have not endured, and I am two-and-twenty to-morrow. My father was killed before the eyes of my mother and myself. He commanded a garrison for the Prince of Orange. He was treacherously stabbed in the street by a soldier in the service of King Louis, who had entered the half-town, disguised as a peasant, selling vegetables. My mother died not long after of a broken heart. I had always spent a considerable time every year with my English relations. Lady Alice Lisle took me into her house a fatherless and motherless girl."

Her voice choked and she could not proceed. There was some water in a carafe on a side table, with a Venetian glass standing by its side. I crossed the room, and pouring out some, took it to the girl. To tell the truth, I was glad to make a movement of some kind. The atmosphere of the room, charged as

it was with feeling, oppressed me. I longed for the open air—to stretch out my arms and breathe it in. Mistress Lisle thanked me with a look of sweetness, which I should have thought it impossible her eyes, fine as they were, could convey. I did not sit down again, but went and stood by the tall mantelshelf, leaning my elbow upon it, and resting my head on my hand. Churchill had not taken the slightest notice of the interruption; he was just waiting for Mistress Lisle to go on with her narrative when it suited her. I fancied, but I am not sure whether I was correct or not, that in her look of thanks to me, as I handed her the water, she conveyed something of her sense of the difference between my master's attitude towards her and my own.

"I am sorry," she said, "to have allowed myself to have been so overcome. The fatigue of a long day's journey, and nights without sleep before it, must be my excuse."

Churchill nodded.

Mistress Lisle went on: "I found my aunt's house at Winchester a haven of rest after all I had gone through—my father's tragic death, and my mother's prolonged suffering, mental and physical. Lady Alice spent her life in doing good amongst the poor of the town. Belonging to the Church herself, her sympathies had no narrow limits of creed. Where there was want or suffering, she ministered with heart and hand. At first I was like one stunned after I reached England. My aunt bore with me with wonderful forbearance and tenderness. Gradually, under her influence, I shook off my

lethargy. After a while I accompanied my aunt on her errands of mercy."

Mistress Lisle seemed to be saying all this in a dreamy sort of way, more to herself than to us. It was perhaps a relief to her to open her lips on the subject, which she had resolutely refused to mention to any one else. Churchill compelled confidence although he denied sympathy. It also seemed as if the girl were nervously preparing for what she was about to relate.

"One night," she continued, "a man came to our door seeking shelter; he gave no account of himself, beyond stating that he had no friends in the town, and knew not where to find a lodging. Something in his conversation showed to my aunt that he was a God-fearing man, and we both took him to belong to one of the sects, which are not in communion with the Church of England."

"Hickes?" Churchill put in.

"Yes, John Hickes. All England knows his name now. He was with us two days, and then departed, as he had come, after darkness set in. We never heard his name again until the day that officers came and arrested my aunt. She was dragged before Jeffreys, charged with ' harbouring a rebel against the King.'" Mistress Lisle stopped, and then went on: "I was in the court throughout the day. The jury would have acquitted Lady Alice, but the brutality of the Judge overbore them. They brought in, at last, after a scene which made all men tremble before the anger of Jeffreys, a verdict of ' guilty.' The Chief Justice sentenced my aunt to be burnt within eight hours."

"My God!" I burst in. "What infamy!"

In common with the rest of England, I had heard something of the story, but not its details. They lost nothing of their effect from the cold, hard, tones which Mistress Lisle employed. Neither Churchill nor I could doubt the smouldering fire which lay beneath.

Her eyes caught mine when I spoke, and her lips quivered. It was the only evidence she had as yet allowed to escape her of what the telling of this narrative cost her.

"Need you go on?" Churchill asked, in more gentle tones than I had ever heard him employ. "I believe I can supply the rest: the intercession that was made to Jeffreys; the postponement, in consequence, of the fulfilment of the sentence; and the King's subsequent alteration of it from burning to beheading."

It seemed to me that my master was intentionally taking this narrative out of her lips. Perhaps he feared a scene, doubting her self-control. Perhaps he was only saving time. I cannot tell.

"You do not know quite all," Mistress Lisle put in. "You do not know my part of it. I went to the King myself. I gained admission to his presence by bribery. I am not a poor woman even in my own right. I flung myself upon my knees before his Majesty. I told him the story of Lady Alice's life—of her care for the poor.

"The King threw at me that my aunt was a sectary, in league with sectaries; that she had harboured a sectary, a would-be regicide. He refused me Alice Lisle's life; but, as a man flings

a bone to a dog, he remitted the burning, perhaps lest a whole nation should lift up its hands with horror against its King, and thrust him from the throne.

"Do you think I am likely to forget?" she asked simply. "I told King James that he and I would meet again, and my word will be kept."

Churchill's eyes drooped under their lids. He was apparently lost in contemplation. I do not think that his thoughts had to do with the outrage James had committed upon civilisation. Knowing my master as I do, I feel sure it was more probable that he was feeling the mistake a man makes in disregarding forces which he deems to be small and of no account. The mouse, in the fable, gnawed the meshes of the net and set the lion free. Here was an example of the contrary. James regarded this woman as of no account. He brushed her petition on one side, reasonable and rightful though it was. Had she been great and powerful, James would probably have acceded to her request. The King had clearly made a mistake in underestimating the force of hatred he was stirring up. Here was an instance of what she could do. If Churchill were lost to the Royal cause, the throne itself was in jeopardy.

I stood leaning against the mantelpiece pondering these things, wondering what Churchill's reply would be, yet little in doubt that the scale, which I had known to be evenly balanced, would be weighed down, on the side unfavourable to James, by what had happened that night.

At this moment some movement on the part of the

girl attracted my attention. She became deadly white and sank down from her chair; probably for the first time in her life, Mistress Dorothy Lisle had swooned from fatigue. I leant forward and caught her in the very act of falling. She lay in my arms senseless. Churchill had stood up, but not in time to be of assistance. The water was still in the glass. He came to my side, and taking it up, sprinkled the girl's face and forehead.

"It does not often fall to me, Lesterne, to play the part of priest at a christening. You and she," he added, "make quite a handsome picture. Unless I am mistaken, it is the second time to-night that you have held her in your arms."

I felt myself blush. Mistress Lisle's head lay on my shoulder; much of her hair had freed itself from its diamond fastening and spread over my coat. My face was near to hers. As Churchill spoke she stirred and opened her eyes. They met mine. She seemed bewildered, and yet with the bewilderment something softer mingled, which I could not interpret.

Churchill turned away and took a pinch of snuff.

"She is coming to," he said. He was too much of a gentleman to embarrass a girl under these circumstances.

With an effort she stood up, I assisting.

"Thank you, sir. I am only a foolish woman, after all. I thought myself strong as a man, but these three days' almost continuous riding have shown me my weakness. I am afraid I shall have to ask you to assist me to my room and to call my woman."

She turned to Churchill, and making a little courtesy, said :

"I must wish you good-night, my lord. I hope to have a favourable answer in the morning."

I, too, went to bed tired, yet, a most unusual circumstance in my case, sleep was denied me. I went over again the events of the day. I thought of the Lady Lettice—her confidence in me; her appeal to me on behalf of her father. Then Mistress Dorothy Lisle obtruded herself upon my night vision. Except that she shared her womanhood, Count Zulestein's niece had none of the characteristics of Lord Cawston's daughter, yet both were of a beauty which any man might be moved to admire. I was not wont to consider such things; the experience was strange to me. The room occupied by Mistress Dorothy Lisle was next to my own. I had heard the two women, mistress and maid, moving about after I myself had retired. In the morning I should see Mistress Lisle again. Churchill would then announce his decision; probably he had arrived at it already.

These were the thoughts which stirred in my brain until they became blurred and indistinct. I suppose I dreamt after that. It seemed to me that I was about to stretch out my hand to a veiled figure, shrouded in some long white substance of a filmy nature, which left the outline of the form beneath it partially suggested, if not revealed. I felt someone drawing me away with a hand on my arm. I turned to look. It was Mistress Dorothy Lisle, her face full of sorrow, as it had been when she told her story to Churchill and myself.

Then I slept, dreaming no more.

## CHAPTER VIII

ABE SALKER

I AM always an early riser. On the morning, after the arrival of Mistress Dorothy Lisle at Ash House, I awoke with the first streaks of dawn across the sky. It took me a few minutes to realise all that had happened the previous day, to disconnect the real from the unreal, the actual incidents from the figments of my dream.

As I lay watching the light gradually expand in my room, picking out the various pieces of furniture, gleaming on a sword or two, and the steel of a helmet on the wall, I thought of the future, wondering how it was going to shape itself. That my master and I had come to the parting of the ways there could be no doubt. Churchill had hesitated; now there was room for hesitation no longer. If what Mistress Dorothy Lisle had stated was true, James had unwisely forced the hand of the greatest soldier in England—now that Turenne was dead, I believed the greatest soldier in the world. Personally, I believed it to be true; at any rate I was assured that the messenger herself had come in all good faith. It was also characteristic of the King. The mistakes that he had made from the outset of his

assumption of power were nearly all in the same category. He stretched out his hand and drew it back. He let his intentions be known first, and either acted or did not act in accordance with them afterwards. In other words, James was a veritable Stuart, only with an added element of intense religious bigotry, which robbed him of the popularity heretofore belonging to his race.

A strong man would have acted quite differently from the way in which Mistress Dorothy Lisle declared the King to be acting now. To such a monarch two courses would have been open. One was to have sent for Churchill, told him of his suspicions and the insinuations of his enemies, and so won him over to absolute loyalty by the personal magnetism of one brave man over another. On the other hand, if the King was assured that my master was planning sedition and disloyalty, leading to actual rebellion, he ought, without taking counsel from anyone, to have arrested Churchill, and held him in safe keeping in the Tower. James adopted neither of these courses. He found out a third for himself. He discussed his plans and intentions with Ministers much more deeply committed to William of Orange than was the very man under consideration. These Ministers knew perfectly, that if Churchill fell to-day their turn would come to-morrow. They consequently persuaded James to delay his action in the matter. Meantime Zulestein, William's agent, was communicated with, and Churchill was warned through his instrumentality.

As I lay there, in the dawn of that October

day, I revolved these things in my mind. After-events only showed the truth of my reflection. As James acted at this juncture, so he did to the last. First he would and then he would not. He threatened and temporised, and temporised and threatened, until the crown itself had slipped from his grasp. What qualities James possessed were not suited to the difficult age in which he was called upon to steer the barque of State.

My thoughts were not wholly of that greater world in which Churchill, and through him myself, was called upon to play his part. There were others mingling with them. I pictured Lady Lettice Latour and her father and brother issuing forth that very moment from the great gates of Cawston Castle, as I had ridden out the previous night. The Earl would, I was sure, be depressed and anxious; his son quiescent, merely obedient to the will of his father; but the Lady Lettice would rise to the occasion: her buoyant spirit would be the nerve of her party. She had that rare form of courage which is most conspicuous, by way of contrast, in a time of adversity and depression. Then I thought of that weary girl, sleeping within a few feet of my bed, who had been moved by terrible experience to a spirit of hate and revenge which I judged alien to her true character. Yet I felt sure that the course she had started upon, the road she had marked out for herself, would be pursued to the bitter end. James and his infamous tool Jeffreys had steeped this virgin soul in the blood-red tide of a great indignation. How she would accomplish her revenge was in the womb of the

future, but something told me it would be accomplished.

At length I sprang out of bed, weary of my own communings, feeling that action was necessary to dispel these day-dreams which were obsessing my spirit. A plunge into cold water and a hasty toilet braced my spirit. I went to the window and looked out. Before me was a balcony overgrown with ivy its whole length. This balcony flanked the windows of the next room as well as those of my own. They were the only apartments at this end of Ash House. Beyond the balcony was a terraced garden, with fruit trees dotted here and there—now that it was October, bare of leaf, and devoid, of course, of fruit. Round the garden was a stone wall eight feet high, with a small projecting parapet, to guard plum and peach trees, nectarines and apricots, which were nailed against the brickwork.

A white frost lay on the ground. The morning ere the sun rose was beginning to show red all round the eastern horizon. It promised to be a glorious day. I determined to summon my servant, and have a canter before breakfast on Sultan. It would take the stiffness out of my limbs, and help to clear my brain, before my master called me to receive his instructions.

The passage and staircase beyond it had a skylight over them, but as yet the sun had not sufficient influence within the house to do more than pick out the shadows. To get to the staircase I had to pass Mistress Dorothy Lisle's room. When I came opposite to it, my foot struck against something, and I nearly tripped up my whole length. A

muttered exclamation, I might almost say imprecation, showed me that the obstacle with which I had come into collision was human at any rate.

Soldier-like, I half drew my dagger, the only weapon I had on, the sword I always carried being left on a chair beside my bed. It was absurd, of course, in the quietude of Ash House to expect an attack. I shut the dagger down again into its case with a half laugh at my own folly.

"You are mighty quick with your weapon, young sir," a gruff voice exclaimed. The man, whoever he was, had evidently heard the small, but effective, weapon returned to its place.

"Who are you?" I asked with some irritation, and a note of command in my voice. "Why do you lie here in the passage, when there are beds enough and to spare elsewhere in the house?"

I stood waiting with something of impatience while the man reared himself slowly up. At length I could see the upper part of his shoulders and his face: there was just sufficient light to distinguish so much; all the rest was in darkness. It gave one a curious feeling, as though there were no legs. I shall never forget the impression made upon me by that early morning vision. Of all unprepossessing appearances I thought this one easily first. The upper part of the shoulders, at any rate, was quite bare, and covered with dark hair, shaggy, like that of a Scotch bull. No doubt the man had divested himself of his tunic, fitting close about his neck, when he lay down to sleep. The face, above the shoulders, was heavy, pitted with small-pox, with beetling brows over bright, but small, black eyes,

which shone like two fire-flies in the illumination from the skylight. The hair of the head was grizzled, and the matted beard was nearly white, in marked contrast to the dark hair below on the chest itself. The man must have been fifty years of age. At that first sight he repelled me extremely. It was only afterwards that I came to find honesty and dogged courage beneath that repulsive exterior.

He did not speak, merely glaring at me, as I in my turn surveyed him. I was almost sorry I had put my dagger back again. It seemed that it might be useful with such a savage specimen of humanity to deal with. There was something about him which indicated great strength. I am by no means a weak man, but I felt sure that in a hand-to-hand encounter, without weapons on either side other than those of nature, I should be worsted.

"Who are you?" I asked again, with determination expressed in my voice to have an answer.

"Men call me Abe Salker," he replied, with a pause between each word, as if ready speech was not his strong point.

"And pray what may Abe Salker be doing here in this passage?"—and yet some idea of the man's identity had begun to dawn upon my brain.

"I am body-servant to Mistress Dorothy Lisle. Where her room is, master, I sleep on the mat outside."

"I have heard of a dog doing it before, but never a man," I remarked with sarcasm. It had struck me, from the first moment I had seen him, that this uncouth specimen of the human race was more animal than anything else.

"You have hit it, master ; I am Mistress Dorothy's dog, as I was Mistress Alice Lisle's dog before."

I felt that I could have bitten off my tongue, to have used sarcasm on such a subject to this man. He had risen superior to me by the fidelity which evinced itself alike in his tone and in his words.

"I beg your pardon," I said ; "so you were servant to Lady Alice Lisle, whose memory we all reverence?"

He stood dumb before me. In his face, still only dimly outlined, I saw passion working so profound and deep I had never observed its like in any human face before. I hastened to change the subject.

"You have been guarding your new mistress. Do you hold her in danger even in my Lord Churchill's house ?"

"I do," he replied ; "there are those who would put her away, never to be seen again. They hate her for what she is. They hate her still more for what she does." He set his jaw out with a grim determination which almost made me give back a step. "They shall never reach her, except over my dead body."

I thrust a gold piece into the man's hand, and without waiting for his slow-coming thanks went on down the stairs. The previous night I had not specially noticed Mistress Dorothy Lisle's attendants. It was not likely I should. It struck me now that Mistress Dorothy had an assistant to be relied upon for her scheme of revenge in this half savage, wholly faithful servant I had just come across, Abe Salker.

I summoned Donald Duvain, my giant Scots groom, to saddle Sultan. He and my other servant,

Macalister, slept in a chamber over the stables. Sultan was soon brought out. We had the usual struggle before I mounted him. I rode him three or four times round the big stable-yard, while he displayed all his particular qualities, trying to unseat me. I love a struggle of this kind. This morning it just fitted into my spirit. Sultan loved it too. In a few minutes I had quieted him down sufficiently to look around me.

Abe Salker had followed me downstairs. He now stood in the yard with his arms folded across his brawny chest. I was amused to notice that Donald Duvain, who rarely met his match, was eyeing this man of Hampshire, obviously appraising his strength.

Then something attracted my eye higher up. Mistress Dorothy Lisle was leaning over the balcony, the morning sun shining on her glorious beauty. She had donned no head-gear. Her lovely hair fell in a cascade down her shoulders. She had been watching my struggle with Sultan, and I fancied with somewhat of approvement in her eyes.

I glanced from mistress to man. It was a strange alliance between beauty and its opposite. Yet together I realised that they might go far towards the accomplishment of what they both had in view. Fidelity to the dead was the binding link. Out of this, and of that which went with it, the sense of mortal wrong, the future would shape itself.

I was glad to put Sultan to a hand-gallop as I raised my cap and passed out of the yard. I needed movement; there was oppression even in that crisp morning air which ushered in a lovely day.

The life of the fields had already begun as I rode down the lane that October morning. Sultan and I were passing over the ground I had traversed the previous night on Diomed. We struck the high-road at right angles to the lane, near to the point where I had first heard the tramp of horses, indicating the approach of Mistress Dorothy Lisle and her servants.

Without any conscious exertion of will on my part, I took the direction towards Cawston Castle. As the distance lessened between the Castle and Ash House my thoughts cleared. They were no longer taken up with the messenger to my master, but travelled back to Cawston. I wondered in which direction the Earl had gone, feeling sure that he must have started long ere this. Sultan carried me much more quickly than Diomed would have done I arrived almost before I knew it at the top of the steep incline, at the bottom of which was the stream dividing one hill from the other. I had to hold Sultan with all my strength to prevent him dashing down at a break-neck gallop, which might well have proved fatal to both of us. I had the horse well in hand when we came to the stream. He went through it with a rush, plunging at the same time, and spraying me all over with the water. I gripped the bridle with both hands and so mastered Sultan's exuberance. We always had a struggle at this particular point, going through the water making the horse frenzied with excitement.

I pulled him up sharply. He stood sideling and snorting, pawing the ground, the very ideal of a wild animal, mastered by man's power. This fight and its

result, which repeated itself, practically, every time I went to Cawston on Sultan, constituted one of the attractions of the ride.

This morning I had another matter which interested me deeply. That was why I halted altogether, instead of giving Sultan a breather up the hill. I wanted to see if the rope, which I had sawed with my dagger the night before, was still there. I looked for it on both sides. It was gone.

Of course, it might well have been that a labourer going to his work in the fields, or a late poacher returning from his midnight prowl, had seen the broken strands and taken them home. A stout rope is always of service. I did not, however, accept either of these solutions. I had felt all along that some one was near to ascertain the result of the trap, which had been so carefully laid. If I was right, probably the originator of the device had removed the evidence of his handiwork.

After a pause, to make quite sure that both ends of the rope were really removed, I put Sultan to the almost precipitous incline. He took it with that pluck and forcing power in his quarters which together gave him his great value from my point of view. A horse that will dare anything, and do anything, is invaluable to a man who rides behind such a master as John Churchill.

I reached the top of the hill, and presently struck the great coach-road, which passes the gates of Cawston Manor some distance further on. The Castle lay away to the left hand. Turning to the right, the road passed through Crewkerne and Yeovil to Salisbury, and so to London. On the

softer turf, by the side of the metalled track, was the mark of coach wheels quite recently made. The centre of the road was too hard to show the complementary indentations. I felt sure that a heavy carriage had passed that way not very long previously. It had evidently taken the left hand side to avoid something more to the right, probably some strayed animal—a cow, or a porker or two.

I turned my horse's head in the direction of Crewkerne. By a longer route I could get to Ash this way. The road was much better, albeit a couple of miles further, than the more direct way by which I had come. I put Sultan at his best pace, giving him a free rein. He responded to my wishes with evident satisfaction. We had a splendid course through the crisp morning air, in which the sunshine was fighting the frost and gradually conquering it. After riding like this for the best part of an hour, I saw a coach in front of me, ascending a slight eminence. I had been expecting something of the sort, and now urged Sultan to his best pace, even increasing the speed with which we had travelled hitherto.

Two servants, not in livery, were at the back of the coach, and two in front, besides the coachman. The footmen in the rear turned round when they heard me approaching. I recognised them at once as servants of the Castle. They also knew me, and apparently communicated to the coachman, for he pulled up his four horses.

Lord Cawston looked out with some anxiety on his face, which was visibly relieved when he perceived who it was. The Earl got out, and was

followed immediately by Lady Lettice. Lord Godfrey did not show himself.

I rode up to them, lifting my cap, and swung myself off my horse. I shook hands with the Earl, and yet glanced in the face of the Lady Lettice. She had evidently not rested at all through the night. There was a tired look about her eyes which told its own tale of preparations and anxiety. She blushed as my eyes rested upon her. I felt, too, that she gave me a little pressure of the hand, when her glove rested on my gauntlet for an instant.

"You are out early, Captain Lesterne, and have apparently ridden hard. Were you coming with any fresh intelligence to Cawston?"

"No, my lord; I was only taking my usual morning gallop. Sultan needs exercise, and I like the air after the dawn."

"We are fugitives," Lord Cawston said, with a wry face.

"Whither are you bound?" I asked.

"First to my Lord Cranworth's place, Stonefield Hall, near Salisbury. He and I have been friends since boyhood. I propose to leave my daughter there, and shall myself go on to one of the seaport towns, with a view to leaving England for the present, until the cloud resting over this unhappy country is dispelled. My son rode forward an hour in advance, to have things ready, and rooms provided at the inns where we shall lie on the road."

"May God bring you back safe and sound, my lord!" I exclaimed fervently.

"Thank you; I trust He will. In the meantime, if my son,"—he paused, "or my daughter needs a

friend, and you are near, Captain Lesterne, you will doubtless act in that capacity?"

"You may rely upon me, my lord," I said.

Lady Lettice looked her thanks. I handed her into the coach; the Earl followed. It rumbled on, while I stood solitary, holding Sultan's rein. I watched the coach till it was out of sight, wondering when and where I should see either or both of them again.

## CHAPTER IX

### COMBATANTS

I RODE home at a steady pace. Sultan had quieted down, now that the exuberance of his first exercising was over. I had opportunity of thinking; and I tried to unravel the skein of my thoughts. Why had I come this road? Why had I not been content with the farewell of the previous evening? Why was there a sinking in my heart, now that the coach had gone on its way and left me behind? I felt myself in a maze of strange and unwonted feeling. The dainty form of Lady Lettice, the piquancy of her many-sided character, her courage in adversity: these qualities stood out before my mental vision. Yes, I had come because of a possible chance of seeing her; at any rate, to ascertain whether she had left Cawston, and if so, whither she had gone. If it had not been for the impression left by the coach-wheels I should certainly have ridden to the Castle, there to glean my intelligence.

I confessed that I had not been frank with myself. At the outset it was just my ordinary morning ride, before the nine o'clock breakfast at Ash House! I did not take out Sultan because he could cover the distance to Cawston and back at the greatest speed!

—of course not ! I remarked upon these disillusionments, these self-deceptions, as I rode slowly home. What did it mean ? Was I really in love, or was it merely sympathy for a beautiful girl, facing misfortune and anxiety for the first time ?

I had not come out for Lord Cawston's sake. That I knew. It was the one fact which stood out clearly.

When I reached the corner of the lane I saw a female form pacing up and down ; she was enveloped in a long riding-cloak, with a hat on her head, surmounted by a long plume of feathers. It was Mistress Dorothy Lisle. Hearing the sound of my horse-hoofs, she turned round. Her eyes met mine. I saw that hers were charged with tears. I had taken her by surprise. I felt like one who had opened another's letter unawares. For the moment I was minded to ride on, with a mere salutation, feeling that she would rather be alone. But a gesture from the girl indicated a welcome. Her eyes smiled through her tears.

I alighted and walked towards Ash House by Mistress Dorothy's side.

" You were out early, Captain Lesterne. I heard you speaking to my uncouth follower, Abel Salker, before I rose, and afterwards witnessed your encounter with this beautiful horse of yours."

She stepped behind me and patted Sultan.

" You are fond of horses ? " I said.

" Yes, horses and dogs. I trust them. They never dissemble. They act the truth, even though they cannot speak it."

" Then you do not trust men, Mistress Lisle ? "

I do not know why, but her tone piqued me.

"I trust Abel Salker," she replied demurely.

"Only Abel?" I asked.

She turned and looked at me; then she stooped down and pulled some grass, offering it to Sultan, who first sniffed at it and then took a little, munching daintily.

"Your horse is too fine a gentleman for grass. He likes something better—something with more flavour in it."

"Only Abel?" I repeated, determined not to be put off by her digression.

Mistress Dorothy, Sultan, and I were all standing still, while she fed him with dainty hand ungloved, but with a diamond ring sparkling on her finger.

It was the third of her left hand.

I wondered why the fact interested me. Mistress Dorothy Lisle was nothing to me, nor I to her. Yet it did.

"You are persistent in your inquiries, Mr. Equerry. Yes, there are others I trust, even among men, but not as I do Abel. He is mine, body and soul. He lives for me, and would die for me, without hesitation or question."

"Who are the others you trust, Mistress Lisle?"

"Are you my Father Confessor?" she flashed at me.

Her eyes shone. The tears had disappeared. She was her own imperious self.

"I do not aspire to that honour. Yet, I should like to know, all the same."

She laughed. "Yet they say men are not inquisitive! Well, there is my uncle, the Count." She

looked me down from head to foot. "I trust you, too, a little"—she made a moue as she said this—"Captain Lesterne."

"I thank you," I said, and bowed. "You are a reader of character, madam."

"I have been trained in the school of adversity. It sharpens our judgments, but does not tend to soften them."

"And the General?" I asked.

"My Lord Churchill?"

"Yes."

"I do not know him. He is not to be read at a glance. His are the inscrutable eyes. His is the face which does not reflect every passing humour."

"Mine does, I suppose." I spoke with some annoyance. I had fancied myself somewhat of a diplomatist.

"Oh, you!" she smiled, "you are quite different. I can read you like an open book."

"I am not flattered," I replied stiffly.

"You might be, if you knew all my thoughts."

She turned and walked on, I following with Sultan.

At the entrance of the courtyard we stopped short. I was struck with amazement at what I saw. A titanic struggle was being waged between my man, the giant Scotsman, Donald Duvain, and Mistress Dorothy Lisle's body-servant, Abel Salker. Both were without their upper garments. Their shoulders and arms shone in the sunlight, the muscles standing out like knotted cords. Never before had I seen any one who could match himself, in mere strength, and without a weapon in his hand,

against Donald. I wondered at Salker's temerity. I glanced at Mistress Lisle's face, expecting to find some fear for her faithful follower expressed upon it. I was much mistaken. Her eyes gleamed with the lust of battle. She was, as it were, waging by deputy a fight on her own account.

"Your man will get hurt," I remarked with some emphasis.

"He will not be the only one."

"Then I am not to interfere?"

"Have you ever seen two cocks on a midden? They must find out who is master before they shake down together."

Not a word more was said. The contest had become too breathlessly interesting.

There was quite a circle of spectators, gathered at a respectful distance, round the combatants, servants of my Lord Churchill's. My own man, Duncan Macalister, was apparently acting as Master of the Ceremonies. He was standing by the tunics of the two wrestlers, and cheering them on with commendable impartiality.

"Have at him, Donald! Throw him over your shoulder. Well played, Shaggy; hold him tight. He's big enough to hold, and some harder."

The other servants shouted their applause, as first one, then the other, got the better in the encounter. I perceived that even my Lord Churchill had come into the doorway, and, his face half hidden, was watching with interest. No one knew a man's thews and sinews, or admired them more than my master.

Hither and thither they struggled, up and down,

until the trough of the pump got in the way. They spun over it, Duvain happening to be the one caught in the back by its somewhat sharp corner. It tore his side, and the blood spurted out.

This seemed to satisfy both the wrestlers, for they mutually let go their hold.

Macalister came forward and bound up Donald's wounds with a strip of linen, which one of the maids produced. Duvain, while he was being attended to, stretched out his hand.

"You are the first man, Master Shaggy-hair," he cried, "that ever chucked Donald Duvain over a horse-trough."

Abe took it, as he wiped the sweat out of his eyes with his great arm.

"You have won, Mistress Lisle," I said, "I congratulate you." I was a bit chagrined that the result should have been in accordance with her obvious expectations.

"I hope it is a happy augury."

As she spoke she glanced at Churchill, standing in the doorway.

## CHAPTER X

### A MOMENTOUS DECISION

CHURCHILL met us as we entered the arched doorway of Ash House. He wished Mistress Lisle a courteous "Good morning," and gave me a nod of welcome.

"You have had the advantage of me," he said. "I have not been lying abed, but nevertheless I have not been out of doors."

So saying, he offered his arm to the lady, and handed her into the large morning-room, where breakfast was served. My master made a capital host; nowhere did he look better than when presiding at his own table.

The room was panelled from top to bottom in oak, which had grown dark with age. Round the wall were some family portraits. I noticed that Mistress Lisle partook but sparingly of the viands which were offered her in succession. Out in the open air she had seemed fresh and animated, but in the house traces of weariness were apparent. Nothing of importance was said until the servants had retired. A flagon of home-brewed ale was set before my master, and he took a deep draught, bowing to his guest as he did so.

"I find," he said, "a little of the 'home-brewed' clears my brain in the mornings. More of it would have the opposite effect. I hope, Mistress Lisle, that you passed a good night, and will accept the hospitality of Ash House for a day or two at least."

"Thank you, my lord," she replied. "I must be gone at the latest by to-morrow, unless your lordship specially desires my continued presence."

"You look tired," Churchill remarked kindly. "Surely your business cannot be so pressing that you are unable to take needful rest and refreshment?"

"I confess to feeling fatigued, and could not in any case ride far to-day, but by to-morrow I have no doubt that my usual elasticity will have asserted itself."

"Are you proposing to go far?"

She looked at Lord Churchill with some surprise. "The Count, my uncle, is awaiting my return with some anxiety. I told him I hoped that not much more than a week would elapse before he saw me again. The roads, however, were in a worse condition than I anticipated, and twice, at least, we lost our way. All of which delayed my coming. I have no doubt that I shall return more quickly. As a matter of fact," she added with rather a tired smile, "I want to be in two places at once, Salisbury and London, but of course Count Zulestein has the first claim."

"It would relieve you, Mistress Lisle, if you could find a trustworthy messenger to the Count?"

"I could not commit any communication to paper, and unless it was Captain Lesterne here, I know of no one whom I would trust with a verbal message." She looked across at me as she spoke. I was on the

opposite side of the table, Lord Churchill being at the end.

I turned to the latter. I took the look she had given me as an invitation, almost a challenge, to do her errand.

"I am quite at madam's service," I said, "if you do not want me, my lord."

Churchill did not take any notice of my proffered assistance.

"There is yet a third," he suggested.

Mistress Lisle looked puzzled. "I do not understand."

"Why not myself, for instance?" Her colour could hardly be less than it habitually was, but the contracting of her eyes showed me the excitement under which she was labouring, stirred by my master's last remark.

"You would not go yourself to Count Zulestein, my lord?"

"I am purposing to do so," the General replied quietly.

"But it is impossible," she interpolated.

"Why impossible?" He was echoing her words as she had echoed his the previous night.

"You would not go to London under these circumstances."

"Why not?"

"The King's warrant. It will be signed by now. You will be arrested before you can enter London. You are too well known, my lord, to escape identification."

Churchill laughed. "Captain Lesterne could tell you that I am rather good at disguises; besides, that

warrant will not be executed. I only want to know if it is actually made out and signed."

"The Tower is a place from which even the greatest men have had a difficulty in making their exit, when once they were securely shut up within its walls," Mistress Lisle suggested.

Churchill laughed again. "Do not be anxious for me, Mistress Lisle." My master laid stress on the pronoun. His eyes, fixing hers, seemed to challenge a question.

"For whom, if not for you, should I be anxious?" she queried.

"For the King," he replied, "if he has signed that warrant! Crowns are such unstable things in these days."

Mistress Lisle was visibly pleased—delighted, in fact—with the turn the conversation was taking; yet she persisted in her argument, I thought to draw my master out.

"There was a 'King-maker' once in England. I have heard that he was a great man, as great as there was in the whole realm. Surely he came to a disastrous end?"

"Possibly! History does not always repeat itself. The sceptres of Kings, too, have become more brittle of late years."

"Do you really mean, my lord, that you will go to Count Zulestein; that you will satisfy yourself of the truth of what I came here to tell?"

"Yes, I do mean that," Churchill announced quietly.

Breakfast was over. Mistress Lisle had risen from her chair. In her excitement she paced the room,

"If this is true," she cried, more to herself than to us, "half the work of my life is done."

Churchill walked over to the window, and stood there with his back to us, drumming a marching tune on the sash with his knuckles.

Mistress Lisle was not in that room at all, although physically present. Mentally she was following the trend of her own imagining. I looked at her broad, white forehead, so expressive of intellect and capacity behind it. I read in her face wonderful tenacity of purpose. She was a woman not lightly to be stirred; but when the fire was once kindled it would burn with steady devouring flame to the end.

From Mistress Lisle I glanced to Lord Churchill. I could not see his face—it was turned away from me; but I could see his back, square-set, masterful; a man of men, one who faced destiny, to shape it to his own ends. I thought of the momentous decision which had been come to the previous night. If Churchill satisfied himself that James had indeed signed an order for his committal to the Tower—and this was the only point in question—he had evidently made up his mind that the die was cast. The long hesitancy, the indecision so foreign to his nature, had reached its period. The King and not his great General had settled the matter. He had practically thrust Churchill into the arms of the party which aimed at subverting the throne. Perhaps of all men, I, Churchill's confidential equerry and secretary, alone knew the workings of my master's mind. There was one other in his confidence, but that one not a man. It was his wife. I

doubted not that, in spite of her illness, my lady had agreed to her husband's decision.

I thought, as I looked at him, how much it would mean ; how many men would be eager to share the confidence of the three persons assembled in the morning-room of Ash House. Lord and Lady Churchill possessed enormous influence over the Princess Anne and her husband, the weak-minded and amiable Prince George of Denmark. If the master and mistress of Ash House took sides in the conflict with William of Orange against James, incredible as it may seem, I felt assured that they would carry with them the King's own daughter and her husband.

What would the news mean to Zulestein, William's confidential representative in London ; to Sunderland, from whom the news had indirectly come, ostensibly serving James, in reality undermining his power ; to Halifax, the one honourable statesman of a day in which treachery ruled ; above all to William himself, patient, strong, silent, capable, tenacious of purpose, the hope of the liberties of England and of the Protestant Faith ; what would it mean to Louis, the great enemy of Holland, the man who, by the power of his purse, had been the real arbiter of the destinies of England during the last two reigns ?

William of Orange had been the one champion capable of meeting the French King on something like equal terms. By the doggedness of his nature and the tenacity of his genius he had stemmed the tide of Louis' all-conquering, all-absorbing power. If the sword of the greatest General of the age were thrown into the scale on the side of William, to

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my thinking, there could be little doubt of the result.

What wonder that Mistress Lisle was weaving day-dreams; that her revenge for the judicial murder of her aunt seemed to her within measurable distance! What wonder that she was elated with the success of her mission!

The morning sunshine flooded the room, yet I felt a strange oppression: the air vibrated with emotion. It was all so still, except for the martial beating of the tune by Churchill's knuckles on the window-sash.

## CHAPTER XI

### POWERFUL ENEMIES

CHURCHILL turned round. Impassive as his face always was, I believe I could read in it more than any one else, save one only. I fancied now that there was a subdued light of battle in his eyes. Expressed in them was something of the same emotion he betrayed, to ever so small an extent, when about to lead his men in a charge against odds, or with scaling-ladders set to mount the wall of a city beset by strong and resolute defenders.

Mistress Lisle awoke from her reverie and looked at him. She did not speak, but awaited his next remark. It came by way of a question.

"You said, madam, that you wished to be in Salisbury, if you are not compelled to go to London?"

"Yes, my lord, I still wish it."

"As you have admitted me so far into your confidence, Mistress Lisle, perhaps you will not mind telling me the purport of your visit? I take it"—Churchill smiled—"that we shall probably now be working on parallel lines for the same object. In any case"—he bowed—"you may rest assured that your confidence is sacred."

His rivals have accused my master of want of faith. All I can say is I have never known him deviate from, much less break, his pledged word.

"I am going to continue," Mistress Lisle said quietly, "the work I have been doing for the last six months."

"What was that?"

"Visiting the towns where soldiers are quartered in all parts of England; preparing the way for what is to come; opening the minds of officers and men to James's real policy and objects; doing the work that God has assigned to me."

She lifted her head proudly as she said the last words. There was no doubt, whether right or wrong, Mistress Dorothy Lisle believed in her mission. Fanaticism it may have been, but fanaticism is a force to be accounted with in the affairs of men.

A look of gravity came into Churchill's eyes. He fixed them upon Mistress Lisle's face.

"You spoke of my risk, of my danger, a short time ago. Have you ever considered your own? We do not want the fate of the aunt repeated in that of her niece."

"I am aware, my lord, that I have been running considerable risks from the day that I embarked on this venture. My name has, I have been informed, been transmitted even by M. Barillon to King Louis, as that of a dangerous person."

"The French Ambassador has written about you, Mistress Lisle?" Churchill exclaimed in astonishment.

"So I have been informed on reliable authority. I believe it is due to pressure from an exalted

quarter that attempts have been made to capture my person."

"Do you mean to state, Mistress Lisle, that the French King has given instructions to have you removed? It seems incredible. Why should he not have acted in the more ordinary way by getting you arrested under English law"—Churchill smiled—"as, for instance, you inform me, they intend to proceed in my case?"

"I believe, my lord, partly for two reasons. In the first place, because of my intimate relationship with Lady Alice Lisle, and in the second place, because evidence available in a court of law was not forthcoming against me."

"My Lord Jeffreys is not very particular about adequate evidence in the case of every prisoner he tries," Churchill remarked sarcastically.

"No; but as regards me the whole of England, and Holland as well, would be looking on. A miscarriage of justice, which revived the name of my martyred relative, would stir the consciences of the whole realm. In addition, the Count, my uncle, is too powerful to allow of such a transaction."

"Yet, of your own showing, you have been stirring up sedition."

"I have never told anything but the truth."

"The truth is seditious sometimes."

"At any rate, Louis preferred a different method. England is swarming with his emissaries. They have made more than one attempt to seize me; once seized, I should never have been heard of again."

Mistress Lisle spoke in accents of calm conviction which conveyed the sense of certitude. Nevertheless,

I have to confess that I was doubtful whether the great strain she had undergone, and was still undergoing, had not affected the balance of her judgment. Churchill, on the other hand, either from courtesy or from a wider knowledge than my own, appeared to accept Mistress Lisle's statements as founded upon fact.

"What proofs have you that you are under this system of espionage?"

"Only the vigilance of my servants and the protecting hand of God have prevented the consummation of my enemies' intentions. I have always taken the greatest precautions to keep my movements from being ascertained before they take place. My name, too, has been a passport to the sympathy and affections of the people wherever I have gone. This has been my shield."

"Well, Mistress Lisle, you have evidently determined on your course; at the same time I should have advised you, knowing what you do, to forego the pursuit of your plans. M. Barillon is a man without scruple, not easily thwarted; pitted against a woman, the odds are not such as commend themselves to my fancy. In coming to me on such an errand, and it may well be guessed, if it is known that you have come——"

"It is known."

"What makes you think so?"

"We have been followed, and at Wiiton, where we lay over a night, an attempt was made to stop us in the early dawn."

"How did you escape?"

"By the great strength of my servant, Abel Salker.

He was riding in front, and seeing two men leap out from the hedge and seize the bridle of my horse, instantly rode back upon them and rescued me with two blows of his powerful fist."

Churchill's eye kindled. "We have witnessed your man's strength this morning, Mistress Lisle. He possesses such a sturdy frame for his inches as even I have never seen before. Did the men escape?"

"Yes; they were hurt, undoubtedly, but the road on both sides was bounded by a thicket into which no horse could penetrate. Abel was afraid to leave two women alone in the road while he pursued them. Besides, they knew the ground and he did not."

There was a pause after this. Churchill was evidently thinking things over. At last he spoke again.

"I would not have you run any risks, Mistress Lisle, from the fact that you have been a guest at Ash House. At any rate, I will ensure your safe conduct as far as Salisbury, to which place I think you said you were bound. I have no immediate need of Captain Lesterne, and will ask him to be your escort. With his two servants and your own it would take a troop of horse to effect your capture."

"I have to tender to you, my lord, my grateful thanks; at the same time, I do not like to trouble Captain Lesterne, and I have no doubt that the Providence that has watched over me so far will do so to the end."

"Providence generally works by human means. I am sure Captain Lesterne will not object to carrying out my wishes."

I bowed my acquiescence. It was strange that Salisbury had been mentioned twice that day. The

intense interest of the conversation, which had just taken place, had absorbed all my attention. I had forgotten for the moment my morning ride and the meeting with Lord Cawston and his daughter. Now it came back to me. I remembered that the Lady Lettice was also going to Salisbury. It was a curious coincidence!

I could not account even to myself for the quickening about my heart, when Lord Churchill suggested that I should act as convoy to Mistress Lisle when she left Ash House on the morrow.

## CHAPTER XII

### LORD CHURCHILL LEAVES ASH

AFTER Mistress Lisle had left the morning-room, Churchill called me to the window.

"I shall leave," he said, "soon after mid-day, taking with me only Baldwyn Marston." Baldwyn Marston was the General's favourite soldier-servant; he had been with him in all his campaigns, was full of courage and resource, devoted to his master, and next to Lady Sarah and myself, shared Lord Churchill's confidence.

"I am sorry not to go with you, my lord, especially if there is any risk to be run."

"You need not be afraid on that account. It is quite possible that I may want you later on. It all depends upon the way in which affairs proceed."

"What do you think will happen?" I inquired.

"William will come. He has made up his mind, and once the Dutchman has come to a conclusion, you and I know well that he is not easily disturbed from it. A storm may drive him back for the moment, but his is the sort of nature which goes on until it succeeds or succumbs. As a matter of fact, no time could be more opportune than the present, as far as the Prince of Orange is concerned. King

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James has managed to alienate the nobles as well as the common people. He has estranged the Church, which at any rate was faithful to his father of pious memory; even the very soldiers he has gathered at Hounslow Heath cheered, so that it could be heard for miles, when the Archishop of Canterbury and the Bishops were acquitted. In addition to all this, Louis has done a very foolish thing, not by any means the first, as regards his military arrangements. He has actually thrown all his troops into Germany, leaving the hands of the Prince of Orange free. If he had attacked Holland, the history of this country, and of Europe, might have been very different."

I listened to Churchill with interest, as in masterly fashion he summed up the principal factors in the great game of politics now being played.

"Will the Prince succeed if he ever lands in England, or will the story of Monmouth be repeated over again?"

Churchill looked out of the window without answering. His next remark did not seem at first sight relevant.

"Mistress Lisle takes me strangely. She is a woman of great strength of character, tenacious of purpose, and of a noble presence. I can understand much, both in regard to what she is and what she does, from the circumstance that she in her own person combines the qualities of two races, English and Dutch. I should be sorry to see her come to any harm. You must see that she is placed in safe keeping when at Salisbury. There is a miller in Chetwynd Street, leading up from the river, of

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the name of Hurst. He and his wife are decent people with whom I have lodged myself; if Mistress Lisle has not fixed upon a place of abode, she might do worse than go to them. The house is an old one, with many passages, and rooms for storing goods." He looked at me significantly, and added : "There are two ways of getting out: one in front and the other at the back. The latter would take time to discover, unless it were shown by some one who knew the house."

I entered my master's instructions in a notebook, leaving out, of course, the detail he last mentioned. I was struck, as I did so, with the care and forethought he had exercised on behalf of his guest. Lord Churchill was not one to take precautions for other people, except those nearest him, without some strong motive. I looked up when I had finished writing, and said :

"You think that Mistress Lisle is in danger?"

"You asked me another question just now, Captain Lesterne, as to the success of the Prince of Orange. You two inquiries come very near to one another on the same plane. The chances of William's endeavour accomplishing its purpose are closely allied to the danger in which Mistress Lisle is living of something worse than death."

"You mean," I said, "that Mistress Lisle has proved herself of sufficient importance to win special attention from—"

Churchill nodded. "The quickest witted man in England, else would he not represent His Most Christian Majesty King Louis at the present time—M. Barillon."

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"M. Barillon is not too particular about his methods?" I inquired.

"The French Ambassador is three parts intellect and one part body. When he was composed the heart was not taken into consideration. He is like shrivelled parchment as regards his skin, but his eyes see further than those of most men. He has, too, a pretty trick of fence, which our swordsmen for the most part do not seem to be able to encounter successfully."

When I left my master's presence I thought over the conversation which had just taken place. It often happened with regard to Churchill's words that they became more clear when they were pondered over, after I had left his presence, than they were when actually spoken. It was the case now. I pieced the riddle of what my master meant bit by bit. William of Orange would come because of his own tenacity of purpose. He would win in this great game of chess, with real Kings on the board, real Bishops and knights, because of Churchill's adhesion. The latter had mentally already decided to throw his influence into the scale against King James because of Mistress Lisle's message; what she had done at Ash House during the last twenty-four hours she had been doing, by her own account, throughout the length and breadth of England for months past; the wonder was that she had escaped so far; if it were known, as it seemed more than probable it would be, that she had come to Churchill on the same errand, the efforts of her enemies would without doubt be increased tenfold.

This was what Lord Churchill had meant. The

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responsibility of guarding our guest, at any rate as far as Salisbury, was committed to my charge. I intended to carry it out to the utmost of my strength and ability. I thought of Mistress Lisle, beautiful, calm, determined; a figure different from any that had ever crossed my path before. I thought of that grim body-servant of hers, Abel Salker, half animal, half man, endowed with an affection for his mistress which was as much allied to the beast as to the human. These, with Mistress Lisle's woman, whom I reckoned as of no account, were my allies in the fight which had to be waged against M. Barillon and his emissaries. My mind went back to that scene at Cawston Castle, when I had dragged the foreigner from the back of the tapestry into the Earl's closet. That man had a grudge against me which he had tried to wreak on the road home from the Castle. It was more than probable that he too was one of Barillon's men. It would not be a matter for surprise if the two hatreds were to combine—the spite against me, and the design on the liberty, if not the life, of Mistress Lisle.

Later on I rode with Lord Churchill, to see him fairly on his way towards London, and to take his final instructions. Marston followed behind, at a sufficient distance not to hear our conversation. By a few touches the General had so altered his appearance that the chances of his identity being discovered were remote. He was dressed as a country gentleman might be. I should not have recognised him at the first sight myself. I now took the opportunity of telling Churchill about my meeting with Lord Cawston in the morning.

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"So the Lady Lettice will be lying in, or near, Salisbury," the General remarked. He glanced at me curiously, I fancied. I was riding Diomed, pacing easily by the side of his big horse Cæsar. Churchill was in the best of spirits, and seemed in no way concerned about the great affairs which were pending, or any danger which might be hanging over his own head. I had rarely seen him more gay. Perhaps his relief was due to the fact that he had come to a decision. Nothing weighs upon a strong man's mind more heavily than being rightfully in doubt as to his course.

"Yes," I replied; "Lord Cawston intended to leave his daughter at Salisbury until his return."

"You seem to be destined to be a squire of dames, Lesterne. The Lady Lettice, with whom you have struck up such a friendship during the last month or two, is not one, if I read her aright, to brook a rival near her throne. I am afraid that in arranging that you should escort Mistress Lisle to Salisbury I have been stirring up trouble for you at no distant time." Churchill laughed; he seemed to be enjoying the mental picture he was conjuring up.

"The Lady Lettice," I replied, "has no right to be annoyed with anything I may choose to do."

"Tut! tut!" Churchill cried; "I touched you with a spur, did I, in a tender part? Well, I dare say, Lesterne, you are capable of fighting your own battles. The young ladies, I confess, are, both of them, of more than average appearance: yet their types of beauty could not be more widely different. Mistress Lisle belongs to the classic school, while the Lady Lettice is quite the reverse; yet different

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as they are in appearance, I think they might be like in one respect."

Churchill slapped Caesar with his gloved palm, making him curvet.

"In what respect?" I asked.

"They might be sufficiently unpleasant to the man who thwarted their will, or preferred some one in their place."

"They would have to get into their place first," I suggested.

"We are not always quite conscious when the ladies do mount their thrones. Sometimes there is no blare of trumpets—no proclamation by a herald. We only find it out after they are safely ensconced, not easily to be disturbed."

I felt myself turning hot, yet I could not have told why. I was glad when a moment later my master turned the conversation.

"By the bye, Lesterne, I may want you to follow me to London. It will depend upon the course of events."

"Yes," I said. "I suppose it will depend upon the happenings of the next few days?"

Churchill nodded. "'Where the carcase is, there will the eagles be gathered together.'"

I did not need to ask him further. I understood perfectly what it meant. If William landed north or west, my master would not be very long before he joined him. If, on the other hand, no landing took place, the General would probably remain in London, where it was easy for him to be incognito, and yet be in communication with Zulestein and others.

Some three miles from Ash House we parted, and

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I turned homewards. The sun was powerful. I rode slowly, meditating on what had passed. It had been arranged that I should lie while in Salisbury at the Lamb, the old hostelry in the centre of the town. Here Churchill promised to communicate with me. As I rode over the top of a small hill, within a mile of Ash House, I saw against the skyline three men on horseback. They were in the open field, with a small fir-wood at the back of them. They were looking intently, as far as I could see, towards Ash. They all wore cloaks of a sombre hue, and might be country gentlemen or traders in a large way. Something about their appearance suggested the costume of the man who had escaped from the strong-room of Cawston Castle. I pulled Diomed up, and covering my eyes with my hands, so as to shut off the strength of the sun's rays and focus my gaze, I looked at them as closely as the distance allowed. I was in some doubts as to whether I would not gallop towards them, taking hedges, ditches, and arable land on my way. They were trespassing on Lord Churchill's property, and I had full right to inquire their business.

Suddenly, however, one of them, turning in my direction, perceived me sitting on Diomed. A word was evidently passed, and the three plunged at once into the wood at their rear.

All this struck me as distinctly suspicious. I reflected that at the point where the horsemen were grouped they could see into the gardens of Ash House, which, as has been said, were surrounded by a high wall. This was almost the only place from which the gardens were visible. They could

also see the balcony which ran before Mistress Lisle's bedroom and my own.

All this struck me not a little. At any other time I should have passed it by as mere curiosity on the part of some strangers, who were interested in the house because of its distinguished owner. Now, however, I was inclined to regard all things as of more sinister aspect. I was, for the time, responsible for Ash House and for the safety of its inmates, now that Churchill was gone. I determined that no vigilance of mine should be lacking to prevent surprise.

As I rode into the stable-yard, Abel Salker was brushing down the horses, upon which his mistress and her two servants had arrived the previous night. An idea came into my mind, and throwing the reins of Diomed to Duncan Macalister—Donald Duvain had not made his appearance again since his overthrow in the morning—I crossed over to Mistress Lisle's body-servant.

Abel saluted me as graciously as he knew how.

"I would have a word with you, my friend," I said. "Let some one else finish your job, and attend upon me for a minute."

At the same time I beckoned a groom, who was lounging in the doorway of one of the stables, to come to the horses.

Salker followed me to the centre of the yard where I could speak without being overheard.

"I found this morning, my man, that you, always sleep on the mat of your mistress's door?"

"That's true, sir."

"Have you ever thought that there was a window as well?"

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"Birds fly to a window, master. Men generally come in at the door."

"That depends, I suppose, on which way is the easier? If I wanted to take away your mistress from Ash House, I think I should try the window before I assayed the door."

"I will sleep on the balcony, master, to-night."

"You will find it cold."

"I am used to that. It won't hurt me. I am tough as hickory."

"Not quite so pliant," I thought to myself.

I then told him what I had seen just before reaching Ash. Salker only grunted, but I saw his hand steal round to the place where a formidable knife was fastened to his girdle.

## CHAPTER XIII

### IN THE NIGHT

I HAD the curiosity to go round to the back of the house into the walled garden which could have been overlooked by the three men on horseback. I did not expect to find any one there, as Mistress Lisle had intimated her intention of resting.

Nevertheless there had been something in the intent attitude of the horsemen which suggested that they were watching something or some one at Ash. I went to satisfy myself.

In the centre of the garden, standing on a broad path which divided it into two parts, was Mistress Lisle. When I saw her she was weaving into a bunch some autumn violets, blue and white, which she had found in a sheltered corner at the base of the pear tree.

Mistress Lisle had not heard me coming. I stood watching her. She was without a hat. I was struck again with the golden glory of her hair and the beautiful clear cutting of her profile. Having tied up the violets, she lifted them to her face, and buried nose and lips amidst the flowers. It seemed as if she absorbed all their fragrance into her very soul. There was a softness about her pose, almost a

gentleness, which I had not noticed in her before. The flowers had softened her. For the time she seemed to have lost the overwhelming sense of her mission—to be a girl in a sheltered garden, with a girl's freshness, a girl's innocence, a girl's charm.

This aspect of Mistress Lisle was so unexpected I had hardly deemed it possible. It was only another proof of how little I knew of women.

I was about to retire without disturbing her, but, in turning round, my spur caught against a trailing spray of ivy, which in its rebound knocked over a flower-pot. The sound attracted Mistress Lisle's attention. She woke up from her reverie with a start, and turned sharply towards me. Her face had changed. It had hardened and grown older; a look of suspicion, almost fear, was in her eyes. I was sorry to have brought her back into a world which could produce such a change in her whole attitude. It told a story of the tension under which she habitually lived. Always on the alert, never knowing what would happen next, or what was likely to come to her.

As soon as she saw me a light came into her eyes. She gave me a welcome. No doubt, as I said to myself, she was pleased to find friend instead of foe, ally instead of enemy.

I had been retiring, but now went forward.

"I have just been seeing my Lord Churchill off, on his way to London. I rode with him as far as Kempston Cross—about three miles. I suppose," I said, "you are satisfied, Mistress Lisle, with the result of your mission?"

"I am more than satisfied; I am thankful."

I wondered whether I should tell her of what I had just witnessed. The three men must have been watching her as she walked, all unconscious of their espionage, in the garden. I decided, however, not to do so. I had warned her grim follower, and between his vigilance and mine I deemed any further precautions unnecessary.

We walked up and down, side by side. The air was cool, almost cold, although the sun's rays had lost but little of their power. I was conscious of this, after riding, but Mistress Lisle, although without hat or cloak, seemed to enjoy the freshness of the breeze.

"I thought you promised to rest, Mistress Lisle," I said.

"So I have been," she answered; "what is more restful than this dear old house, this walled garden, these violets?"—she lifted them to her nostrils once more, and then, with a pretty little bow, held them up for me to scent their fragrance. "This is what I should like always: comfort, and shelter, and peace; instead I have"—she paused—"well, what I have."

It seemed to me that what Mistress Lisle needed, what would be best for her, would be a man's protecting care. One who would guard and shield her womanhood from the stress of the battle of life.

"I should like to see you really rested, one day, Mistress Lisle."

"Ah! one day, when the 'Ides of March' are past. Rest will come to me when my task is accomplished, or when I myself am at rest."

She was playing with her words half whimsically,

half sadly; I did not know how to answer her. I knew that nothing I could say would turn her from her purpose.

At this point she shivered slightly.

"The wind is cold," I suggested, "and you are without wrap of any kind."

She lifted her head, looking away, it seemed to me, into a dim distance.

"Is the wind cold?" she asked. "I had not noticed it."

"You shivered," I remarked. "Perhaps you felt it without being aware of it."

The shiver was from within. From the past, or from the future, I know not which. Possibly a blend of the two."

Lady Churchill's indisposition continued. She was liable to these attacks of malaise. I inquired after her during the afternoon.

At five o'clock Mistress Lisle and I sat down to dinner alone. We felt, by this time, none of the restraint which characterises strangers. The crowded incidents of the hours, since we met the previous night, had removed all thought of unfamiliarity. We had been brought together by common experiences mutually shared.

After the servants had left us, fruit and wine having been placed on the table, Mistress Lisle seemed inclined to talk. She was cutting up an apple into dainty pieces.

"Is not the seat of the Earl of Cawston near here?"

"Yes," I answered. "I was returning from there last night when I heard you coming up behind me."

"He is one of us. I should like to have seen him before leaving the neighbourhood."

"It is too late now. The Earl has had warning that he is liable to arrest as a sympathiser with the Prince of Orange. He consequently left the Castle this morning."

"I am sorry," she remarked. "We do not want to lose any one of influence in this part of the world, if the Prince lands in the West. Do you know in which direction the Earl went?"

"He was going to the coast, I believe, taking Salisbury on his way, intending to leave his daughter, the Lady Lettice, there with Lord Cranworth at Stonefield Hall."

"Lord Cranworth!" she exclaimed. "His son, Colonel Fitzroy Allayne, is in command of a regiment of horse stationed near Salisbury. I had intended seeing both him and his father." Then something seemed to occur to her. "You said that the Lady Lettice Latour—that is her name, is it not?—was to be left in safe custody at Stonefield Hall. If we go together to Salisbury will you kindly introduce me to her, Captain Lesterne? You know her well enough, I suppose?"

I was sitting at the end of the table, Mistress Lisle to my right. She looked at me, just in the ordinary way, as she asked the question. It was nothing more to her than playing a pawn in her game of chess. I was annoyed to find that I flushed. It seemed to create an emphasis where none was intended or needed.

Mistress Lisle smiled. "I see you know her very well, Captain Lesterne."

"It is the heat of the room. I think the lamps are more than usually hot to-night."

"Possibly," she replied. "Still, I am glad you do know the Lady Lettice. It may be of great assistance by and by. Colonel Allayne's troopers are all Hampshire and Dorset men, recruited from the militia. They are likely to be on our side if their commanding officer is of the same way of thinking. There are other regiments about, mainly composed of Irish, which the King has sent especially into the West. I should have no hope of them. Colonel Allayne and his men are different. They are more than half on our side already."

"And you intend to complete their disaffection?"

"I intend to try, with your help and that of the Lady Lettice:

"I think, Mistress Lisle, that we had better wait to discuss these matters after we have reached Salisbury. My master's orders were to convey you there with safety. He will doubtless send me fresh instructions later on."

"You mean you are not a free agent, Captain Lesterne?" she remarked coldly.

"No servant is altogether a free agent, Mistress Lisle, least of all one who has to do with a man like John Churchill."

"You share his hesitancy as to taking sides?"

"In a crisis like this a man may well doubt, with England as the stake, and civil war as the price."

"Are loyalty to freedom and the faith of our fathers not to be taken into consideration?"

"I do not want to argue with you, Mistress Lisle. I am in the hands of my Lord Churchill. He gave

me my chance when a mere stripling. I have seen service under him with the army of Turenne. I have been by his side in many a hazardous emprise. He is a man of keen and vigorous judgment. Where he leads I follow; but if I were to strike out a course for myself, and he to disapprove, the tie between us might be broken."

"Of course you are right to consider this, Captain Lesterne, but I believe Lord Churchill would wish you to assist me in these matters to the utmost of your power."

"In that case, you may command me body and soul."

"On which side is the Lady Lettice?"

Again I felt myself flush at the sudden introduction of the name. "She dreads that her father should risk life and safety by embarking in this quarrel."

"Then her sympathies are with King James?"

"I should say to the contrary, but a woman often shrinks back when a man risks."

Mistress Lisle, having finished her apple, rose from the table. I held the door open for her, and she passed out. She bowed to me.

"I shall be interested in making the Lady Lettice's acquaintance at Salisbury. It is always pleasant to meet with people who are of a different type to yourself; besides, I should like to know the sort of woman that appeals to Captain Lesterne."

With that she swept out of the room, and I closed the door behind her. I went back to the table and helped myself to a glass of canary, taking with it a slice of pine-apple. Ash House was famous for its pine-apples. It was the one fruit Lady Churchill

preferred to any other. As I looked round the polished mahogany with its delicate china and Venetian glass, I thought that the characters of women varied as did the fruits before me. It seemed that in selecting an apple, hard and somewhat sharp, in preference to a ripe and mellow pear or luscious pine-apple, Mistress Lisle had indicated her character; yet, as I remembered the scene in the garden, her caress of the violets, there seemed something at variance with my conclusion. I was fain to confess that woman formed a complex study. She has as many shades in her character as there are colours in the rainbow, and her moods change as does the sky of an autumn day.

It was late when I went up to bed. The house was in darkness. I carried with me a small lanthorn which was always set for me in the hall at Ash. It was my own property, and had been with me through several campaigns. I mounted the staircase, and traversed the long passage leading up to the rooms occupied by Mistress Lisle and myself, the only ones, as I have said, in this wing of the mansion. I had to pass Mistress Lisle's door, and as I did so I looked to see whether the hairy manservant lay at his post. There was no one there. I came to the conclusion that he had accepted my suggestion of guarding the window rather than the door. Behind Mistress Lisle's oak all was silence; more than probably she had been asleep for a couple of hours.

I entered my own room, and, before retiring to rest, determined to ascertain whether Abel Salker had taken up his position on the balcony. A log fire burnt in my own fire place. It looked comfortable

against the half dark of the room. I pictured Abe lying outside in the cold night. It made me shiver. At the same time it gave me a great respect for this creature, half brute, half man, wholly loyal.

Softly I opened the casement, lifting up the lower part, and stepped out. I still held the lanthorn in my hand, but the light of moon and stars would have been just sufficient to enable me to see what I had come to ascertain. A figure clad altogether in sheepskin lay just within the shadow of the balcony. I raised my lanthorn and surveyed the object. As I did so, two bright eyes fixed themselves upon my face. Abel's vigilance was keen enough. He had been roused, evidently, even by my light step. I nodded to him; not a sentence was exchanged between us; then I returned to my own room. I determined not to fasten the catch. He could come to me if he would.

Before getting into bed I banked up the fire, putting on more logs. It roared up the chimney and gave me a sense of companionship. When Churchill was absent Ash House always seemed strange and empty. I felt, too, an added sense of responsibility.

## CHAPTER XIV

### AWAKENED

I THINK I must have slept heavily directly I got into bed. At any rate, I remember neither a period of drowsy reflection nor one filled with dreams. I was suddenly roused by a hand on my shoulder.

I woke up with a start, and for a moment it seemed as if I was the victim of a horrible nightmare. It cannot have been much more than an hour, or an hour and a half, after I retired to rest. The fire still blazed on the hearth. It shot up lights on to the ceiling and into the corners of the room. Tongues of flame appeared to be playing about the bed. Bending over me was a pair of gleaming eyes, set in shaggy hair. A face half beast, half human, was so close to mine that I could feel its breath. It took me a full moment to realise that this monster, as it appeared in the treacherous and uncertain light of the blazing log, was Mistress Lisle's henchman, Abel Salker. It was a wonder I had not either struck him in the face, or shouted out before the recognition came.

The moment of awakening from deep slumber is never a very clear one, intellectually. When you add to this the weird effects a fire produces, if it

is the only light, small wonder will be experienced that I was slow in arriving at the truth.

Directly I did so, however, I realised that what I had anticipated to a great extent the previous day was happening. By a gesture Abel indicated silence. I whispered to him, "Is there someone in the garden?"

He nodded. "Four men, I think."

In a moment I had flung off the bed-clothes and was standing by his side. I shivered; for the first time I was conscious that the cold night air was coming through the curtain.

"Go out on to the balcony," I said. "I will follow in a moment."

Abel hardly waited for the command. In an instant he had stepped out, more noiselessly than I should have thought possible, considering his great bulk and somewhat clumsy build. Abel was bare-footed which, of course, helped him not a little.

It did not take me more than two or three minutes to don my garments. I drew my sword, leaving the scabbard on the chair, and, with it bare in my hand, followed Abel.

The only light came from the crescent moon and the stars. It was clear enough to see outlines only. The wall surrounding the garden stood out against the light of the sky beyond. I could distinguish trees stretching out their branches as if pointing long, mysterious fingers. Not a sound broke the stillness. For a moment I imagined that Salker had left the balcony, as I could not see him anywhere.

As my eyes accustomed themselves to the dim

light I distinguished Mistress Lisle's body-servant crouching down in a far corner. He had bent himself double, and looked more like a mound of earth than a man. I had hardly had a minute to reconnoitre, or to accustom my eyes to the gloom, before I heard the sound of steps on wood. They came from behind me. I wheeled round in time to see a head and shoulders appear over the top of the balcony. Doubtless a ladder had been placed against it before I came out. The face was masked. I could see the gleam of steel.

I sprang towards the figure, and reached it just as the man left the ladder ; evidently he saw me as quickly as I saw him, for our swords crossed instantaneously. My assailant was a big man and had a considerable mastery of his weapon. During the last few years I had encountered without discredit, in the fencing school and in actual combat, some of the best blades of both the English and French armies. I was not, therefore, afraid of being able to hold my own, provided that the light stood me in sufficient stead. In this matter my adversary had the advantage, for whereas he came against me accustomed to it, I met him blinking from my bed, seeing more stars than the firmament actually presented to the vision. For this reason, two or three times I timed his attack late, and although I managed to ward off the full force of the blow, he cut my tunic and let a little blood. His superior weight made me give back. Had I known what would follow, I would have striven to prevent this, but the balcony narrowed at the end. The space in front of my window was wider. I preferred to

fight there, where the greater width afforded more room for the sweep of our blades.

As it turned out, this giving back on my part exactly suited his purpose. It enabled a second man to follow him up the ladder, and come to the assistance of his ally.

The newcomer was masked likewise, and wore a tight-fitting tunic. They were both, in fact, dressed alike. I recognised at once a similarity to the garb of the spy I had dragged from the tapestry at Cawston Castle. Something in the appearance of the man I was fighting suggested that he was the very prisoner who had escaped from the strong-room at Cawston, and had tried to do me an ill turn as I rode home later on.

I owed him a grudge for that piece of trickery, and, if I was right in my surmise as to his identity, I intended to pay it.

I wondered that Abel Salker had not come to my assistance, for of course the first onset, and the meeting of our swords, must have reached his ears immediately. All the rest of the household of Ash House was far enough away. This wing, in which Mistress Lisle's room and mine were located, was quite distinct.

United shouting might have procured assistance, but no thought of such a thing crossed my mind. I was quite confident that Salker and I were equal to meeting, and overcoming, any attack that might be made upon us.

All this passed through my mind, while I stood there on the balcony, thrusting and parrying, parrying and thrusting, in the meagre moonlight.

The second assailant could not reach me. There was not room to get past, but with half an eye I saw that he was trying to get to a place where he could thrust in under the arm of his friend as soon as my guard was occupied. To prevent this I redoubled my efforts, and each time he moved, I moved so as to bring the big man's body between us. I quickly found that I was more agile and swift of movement than my heavy assailant.

I tried several tricks of fence unsuccessfully. They were met clumsily, but still my attack was frustrated; then I got my chance. The masked man made a desperate lunge, and overbalanced himself a little on the uneven floor of the balcony, the wood being in a bad state of repair. I saw my opportunity, and in an instant got under his defence and ran him through the muscles of his sword-arm. Uttering a cry of pain, the weapon dropped from his hand, ringing as it struck the boards. At the same moment a curious noise reached me. It was more like that made by a beast than by a man. I turned half round, but instantly came back, as the second of the two men who had mounted the ladder thrust aside the one who had first attacked me. He hoped to take me unawares. A dagger was in his left hand: while he thrust at me with his sword, making a feint, he struck almost simultaneously with his dagger. I sprang back, and the force of his attack brought him almost into my arms. He was too close to me for my weapon to be affective. I gave him a buffet on the ear with the clenched fist of my left hand. He spun round, caught against the low wall of the balcony, and with a cry fell right over it.

My first assailant had taken the opportunity of my attention being diverted to regain the ladder. He was, of course, powerless against an armed man. Suffering from a wound which must have been extremely painful, the blood flowing freely, no one could blame him for making good his retreat. I was just in time to see his masked face disappearing downwards towards the garden.

Having won the fight at my end of the balcony, I now turned to see what was happening at the other end, to find a solution for the mystery why Salker had not come to my assistance.

Between me and her body-servant Mistress Lisle was standing. She was just outside her own window. I could also see her woman's head and shoulders thrust out from the casement. Mistress Lisle was attired in a long gray robe, almost like a nun's dress, which she had evidently flung hastily about her form. Her beautiful hair streamed back from her shoulders; in the mysterious light she looked like some angel visitant from another world. I thought at first that both mistress and maid were looking in my direction, but on closer inspection I found they were turned half away. I gathered that they had been looking at me until the interest of my part of the struggle ended, with the disappearance of the two men over the balcony.

Now Mistress Lisle, without moving her body, had half turned her head. Something held her attention—I had almost said fascinated her—in the far corner of the balcony. I could not see what it was, because the girl intervened between me and the further end. I ran up rapidly to Mistress Lisle. She held out her,

hand to me. My right hand still grasped the sword. I transferred it to the left and took hers into mine. It was stone cold. She might have been a statue. I shall never forget my feeling there on the balcony of Ash House at this moment. There seemed a horror in the air. I could not understand what it was. It conveyed itself to me in the touch of Mistress Lisle's fingers. It was subtle, beyond analysis. I felt it chill me to the bone.

"Save him!" she whispered. "I cannot. Abe frightens me when he is like that. I think he is possessed by some demon. Can you do nothing to help the man?"

"What man?" I asked. I was completely mystified. I did not in the least understand what Mistress Lisle meant. I looked past her into the corner of the balcony where I had first seen Abel Salker. As far as I could tell he was there still, in exactly the same attitude. It appeared to me as though he had never moved. The man must have gone out of his mind, I thought, not to come to the rescue when I was attacked by two assailants. I wondered whether Abel was a victim to a form of catalepsy which I had seen on the Continent of Europe, when the limbs become rigid and a terrible distortion passes over the face. Salker's features were hideous and alarming enough at the best of times; what they must look like, if transformed as I imagined possible, it was difficult to conceive. A delicately-nurtured girl might well shrink from the sight. Thus I argued to myself.

While I was thinking in this way my attention was suddenly diverted. I suppose that we had made more

noise in the encounter which had just taken place than I imagined. At any rate, at this juncture a shout was raised, no doubt announcing help to me, and not intended to warn my enemies. I recognised the voices—for there were two of them. They were those of my body-servants, Duncan Macalister and Donald Duvain. Two more doughty assistants no man need wish for in a fray, as I had proved a hundred times; but now they had arrived too late to do anything except try and capture the men who had come to kidnap Mistress Lisle.

I leant over the parapet and looked down into the garden. Three figures were running away as fast as they could towards the further wall. Two of the three were assisting the third—no doubt the man I had wounded.

My two servants ran round under the balcony. In the half-dark they had failed to see the men escaping. I called out to them, bidding them try to intercept the fugitives before they reached the wall. I had no doubt that the men who had raided the house had brought with them rope-ladders, such as are used in attacking cities, to assist them in scaling the high wall of the garden.

It took a minute or two to explain the situation to Macalister. Then he and Donald started off down the garden as fast as they could run, but the trees formed an impediment. To avoid them they had to dodge from side to side. I could hear the crashing of both pursuers and pursued as they made their way through the bushes at the lower end of the enclosure.

There was a shout of disappointment after all five

had disappeared. I gathered that Macalister and Duvain had arrived too late. The men had escaped.

My attention was now turned once more towards the balcony itself. I had been holding Mistress Lisle's fingers in mine during this last scene without being conscious of the fact. Now I suddenly felt the fingers stiffen. I was just in time to save the girl from falling to the ground. She had not exactly fainted, but had lost power to support herself in an upright position. Her lips, the only part of her face with any colour in it, were as white now as her cheeks and neck.

I knelt on one knee, supporting her body on my arm. Her servant, Carder, stepped out to take her from me.

"Poor lamb!" the old woman said; "it is enough to frighten the life out of any one, let alone one who has gone through what my mistress has."

I placed the girl in Carder's arms. Her helplessness gave me a deep feeling of tenderness and sympathy.

"You had better take her in, dame," I said. "Lay her on the bed. I will get her some eau-de-vie from the steward's pantry."

Mistress Lisle was not wholly unconscious of what was passing; she waved her arm slightly. I gathered she wanted to speak to me. I leant my ear downwards until it was close to her lips. I could feel her gentle breath on my face.

"Go, Captain Lesterne, to Abel." She said every word very slowly, as if she had a difficulty in enunciation. "He may not be quite dead."

"What, Salker!" I cried. "I am sure he is all right. He is only in a fit of some kind."

She stirred painfully. "Not Abel," she said, "but—the—man—he—has—got—under—him—in—the-corner."

Immediately after saying these words with great difficulty, Mistress Lisle went off into a dead faint. I had hardly time to grasp their meaning, being taken up with the necessity of looking after the speaker.

Dame Carder and I carried her between us across the window-ledge into the room, and laid her down on the bed.

"You will have to be quick, sir, if you mean to be in time."

"Was not your mistress wandering in her mind? There is surely no one in that corner but Abel Salker."

"Yes, there is, sir. A man in a mask, like the two that attacked you, came up a ladder close to Abe. He was crouching down waiting for him. He has ears as quick as any animal. My mistress and I saw him seize the man and drag the mask from his face; then he uttered such a diabolical laugh, you must have heard it, sir, if you had not been so much taken up with your own fight. He took him up in his arms, and I think he must have crushed the life out of him, for the man hardly gave a groan. Ah, sir! it was sickening not to hear anything. I would rather he had cried out."

The old woman shuddered, as the recollection of what had happened came up before her.

"This must be seen to at once," I cried.

The terrible ferocity of Salker's nature was written in his face, and I had had evidence of his giant

strength the previous morning, when he wrestled with Donald Duvain. I sprang to the window and scrambled out. My sword lay on the floor in the balcony. I had dropped it there when I had assisted Mistress Lisle after her faint. I now picked it up, and ran along the narrow space, between the parapet and the wall, to the spot where Salker crouched.

When I got close to him he half turned round ; all his body was in the shadow of the low balcony, but his head showed above it.

"Get up, Salker," I said. "What have you got there?" I could just distinguish that he was kneeling on something, but it might have been a mat for aught that I could tell.

He vouchsafed a ghastly leer by way of reply. It angered me, and I pricked him with my sword. "Get up," I cried once more. "Do as I bid you, or it will be the worse for you." The tone of authority quelled him, and very slowly he rose to his feet. I stooped down, but even then could only vaguely conjecture that the shape of a man, quite still and immovable, lay before me.

I transferred my sword from the right hand to the left, and then reached to pick him up. Salker uttered a sound like a snarl, an animal sound.

"He is mine," he cried. "I took him. I knew him at once." He bent his head towards me until I could see his teeth gleaming within a foot of my face. "He was Lady Alice's servant. He killed my mistress. He gave information to the watch that she had sheltered a rebel. He murdered her just as though he had done it with his own hands. I vowed

I would crush him when I met him, and I have crushed him like I would a viper."

Salker poured out these words in a rapid torrent. Then, before I could interfere or do anything, he seized the body, lifted it up over his head, and sent it hurtling through the air into the garden. I heard it crash against some trees and then fall to the ground.

For a moment I felt inclined to run Salker through, I was so angered at his action. But a minute's reflection cooled my feelings. If what Abel had said was true, this man, whose name I did not know, had certainly brought his fate upon himself. He had played a treacherous part by the Lady Alice Lisle, whose bread he had eaten, and in whose service he was when he did the dastardly deed. Since then, instead of feeling remorse for his betrayal of the gentlest of women, he had tried to earn a further reward by pursuing her niece. Salker had indeed wreaked upon him a terrible vengeance, but it was one in accordance with his nature. I felt I could not punish him for it.

Instead, I called to my two servants and gave them certain instructions. The three men whom I had seen running across the garden, one of them wounded by my sword, escaped for the present. Abe Salker, however, had made no mistake about his part of the tragedy. A grave had to be dug in the field beyond the garden wall at Ash House. A traitor of the deepest dye was lowered into it.

In the morning Mistress Lisle met me at breakfast. She was looking white, but that was her normal

characteristic. She said but little, and asked no questions about what had passed after she fainted.

I do not know, of course, whether she had heard anything from Dame Carder. Probably not. My impression is that Mistress Lisle knew quite well that when Abe Salker took a matter in hand he did it completely.

## CHAPTER XV

### ON THE JOURNEY

WE were timed to leave Ash House at ten o'clock. Before doing so I sent up to Lady Churchill, by one of her women, to know if she felt equal to receiving me. Her ladyship signified that she would be prepared for my visit in a few minutes.

A quarter of an hour later I was ushered into the ante-room, which opened into her sleeping apartment. The Lady Churchill extended her hand. I stooped and kissed her fingers respectfully. She motioned me to a chair.

"I am sorry, Captain Lesterne, that my lord was not able to take you with him to London. You are in all his secrets, and share his full confidence."

I bowed. For the first time I looked in her face, and noted the marks of her illness, which some powder hastily laid on failed to conceal. I also thought that I read in her eyes a look of anxiety. Lord and Lady Churchill were devoted to one another, quite as much now as when they were first married. Although my lady spoke her mind to him freely when he was present, and was not always particular who might be listening, she disliked exceedingly his absences, which were

necessarily frequent, and for long. On this occasion Lady Churchill showed other feeling in her eyes than that of mere regret at her separation from her husband. It did not surprise me, for the time was indeed perilous, especially to a man who played for such high stakes as did my master.

"It was by my lord's express orders that I did not accompany him."

"Of course, I know," she remarked petulantly. "Nevertheless, I am sorry." One of her feet rested on the ground; every now and then she tapped the floor, by way of emphasis, with the high heel of her shoe. "My lord is apt to be venturesome and you are generally cautious. I feel safer when you are with him. You have seen this William of Orange, Francis. What is your opinion? Will he come? He has met with a reverse and has been driven back, I am told. Will he forego his purpose, think you, this phlegmatic Dutchman who wants to be King of England?"

Lady Churchill laughed, I thought a little contemptuously.

"I saw the Prince, my lady, at his country house near Delft. He is not grand-looking, like your husband, but he grows on you as you watch him. I should say that nothing but death would stop him from any course he had made up his mind to pursue."

"You are quite enthusiastic, Francis." She spoke with sarcasm in her voice.

"You asked me, my lady," I replied, somewhat nettled.

"You are quite right, and I have got my answer.

Doubtless, between you, I must rest satisfied. It means a good deal to me," she said more softly. "If William fails; if he does not come; or if, coming, he shares the fate of Monmouth, my husband——" She stopped as if she did not care to conclude the sentence.

"I do not think my lord will commit himself to any course until he sees his way through it."

"You judge my husband like the rest of the world, Captain Lesterne." She always dropped the use of my Christian name when she was not pleased with me. Yet, as before, I had only spoken what I thought.

"My lord would not be wise if he acted in any other way."

"Exactly," she replied. "We live in an age which requires prudence more than honour and loyalty, shall we say?"

I hardly knew what my lady was driving at; perhaps she did not know herself.

"The time is a difficult one," I assented.

"Your head is safe enough, Francis. It is screwed right on your shoulders and will not readily come off. Besides, in the last rebellion it was the small people who suffered; in this one, mark me, if it fails, James will fly at higher game. He is afraid himself, and frightened men are always cruel. Remember that it is my wish that you rejoin my husband as soon as possible."

"My lord gave me instructions to remain at Salisbury until I had a message from himself."

"He seems strangely concerned about this baggage, who has taken up her quarters at Ash

House, and well-nigh gets kidnapped in the dead of night."

Of course I knew that my lady must have heard the whole story by this time. I was not surprised at her remark, only at the contemptuous way in which she referred to Mistress Dorothy Lisle.

"My lord was interested in her story. She has been greatly wronged and has greatly suffered."

"You wax quite eloquent, Captain Lesterne. You ought to have been a Parliament man, not a soldier."

"I generally find the sword easier than the tongue, my lady, so I trust I have chosen my right vocation."

"I trust so, too. By-the-bye, I hear the baggage is of a curious style of beauty. Am I right?"

Lady Churchill fixed me with her eyes, as though I were a hesitating witness from whom she would extract the truth.

"I suppose some men would call her beautiful," I answered. "She has perfect features, an ivory skin, and abundant fair hair."

"Your picture quite makes me want to see this feminine marvel. What a pity my indisposition has prevented my receiving her in due form! She seems, however, to have got on fairly well under the care of my husband and of yourself, Captain Lesterne."

"I do not think that Mistress Lisle knows whether she is fair or not," I replied somewhat hotly. Lady Churchill's tone failed to please me.

"They never do, women! But perhaps the men who sent her had some inkling of the fact, Captain Lesterne, that she was not altogether—plain. His

Grace of Sunderland, for instance. The Dutchman, Count Zulestein, who may or may not be this Madam Lisle's uncle. Why did not they send a man to my lord? He could have come more quickly, and with less fatigue. A woman is a curious messenger to choose to gallop across England on a political errand."

"I think Mistress Lisle chose herself. It is part of her mission to avenge the fate of her aunt, Lady Alice Lisle, whom your ladyship knows full well was foully murdered to satisfy the spite of the King."

"It is a pretty story, well put together; I must believe of it as much as I choose, or as much as I can."

She tapped on the floor more vigorously than ever.

"Well! I must not detain you, Captain Lesterne; you have to do my lord's bidding. It is a new part for you to play in this comedy of errors, that of squire of dames. Mind you play it manfully. You, at any rate, are free to do what you like—to browse where your fancy pleases."

I did not fully catch her ladyship's meaning.

"I have to do my lord's bidding," I said.

"Oh yes, in some matters, but there is the salvage beyond. Take care, Mr. Equerry, that you be not enthralled with 'perfect features, an ivory skin, and abundant fair hair.' Was not that the category you gave me just now of the baggage's charms?"

"Mistress Lisle has quite other thoughts than those you would attribute to her, my lady."

"Not thoughts, Francis. I did not speak of

thoughts, but instinct. A woman's instinct is to please, especially when she is young and beautiful, and the other sex with whom she has to do is, at any rate, passably good-looking, perhaps a trifle more."

I was silent. Nothing I could say would convince my lady, so I held my peace. Presently she dismissed me, and in parting gave me a piece of advice.

"I think I have heard a whisper, Francis, of a girl I used to know as a child who is grown up into a woman. She lives not far from here. If my information is correct, this *belle dame* is not altogether indifferent to a certain dashing equerry. My husband tells me that this lady of whom I speak has changed her quarters to Salisbury, whither you too are going, in company with Mistress Lisle. Of course you must do what you are told, only my advice is, not more than you are told. That is all."

I bowed, and went out. Half an hour later Mistress Lisle and I rode out side by side from the gateway of Ash, where I had first seen her under the lamplight. I had sent Donald Duvain on to reconnoitre the road. After the happenings of the night before I determined to run no risk of surprises. Behind, at some little distance, were Duncan Macalister, Mistress Lisle's woman, Dame Carder, and Abe Salker. The last named had not opened his mouth since the encounter on the balcony. There was a look, however, on his face which I took to be satisfaction rather than despondency. I judged that he was not displeased with what he had done. I had purposely separated Donald Duvain from his antagonist of the previous morning, lest

there should be some feeling of rancour still subsisting between them.

Neither Mistress Lisle nor I felt inclined to talk. I was pondering what my lady had said to me. I glanced at Mistress Dorothy, trying to see her with another woman's eyes. She was certainly beautiful. No one, of either sex, could doubt it for a moment. On horseback her figure looked particularly well, and the rapid motion through the crisp air gave her the faintest tinge of colour, which was all that was necessary to render her physically complete. At the same time Mistress Lisle's very absorption in what she regarded as her life's work stood in the way of any feeling which might be aroused by her personal charm. Looking at her now as I rode by her side, I could see how absolutely self-centred she was. Her spirit had gone far away from her physical environment. There was a look of elation, of satisfaction, and mingled with it some shade, if not of anxiety, at any rate of serious contemplation, with regard to what lay before her. She was facing the future, and at the same time thankful for the successes she had achieved in the past.

I thought, as I glanced in her direction, that to a great extent her mind was an open book to me. She was reflecting on the difference forty-eight hours had made. She had come to Ash House wearied with her long journey, physically fatigued after so many hours, day succeeding day, in the saddle. Her very weariness had made her depressed, the condition of the body producing an effect even upon that indomitable spirit. She had been more than doubtful whether her mission to Churchill would be

a success. Her anxiety had been increased tenfold by the fact that my master's adhesion to the cause for which she was working was the turning-point in her mission.

We pushed on mile after mile, steadily working our way towards Salisbury. Mistress Lisle had entirely surrendered to me the arrangements of the journey. Her implicit confidence, coupled with the instructions of Lord Churchill himself, gave me a sufficient sense of responsibility. Our journey I considered would take us two days to accomplish. I proposed to lie for the night at Stourton.

Close to the river Stour was an old coaching inn, the Swan and Cygnet, where my master and I had often rested on our journeys from London to Ash House. Lord Churchill's word was law to Master Adrian Ross, the landlord.

Stourton lay some thirty miles from Ash, and to do the distance in a day, considering the state of the roads, we should have to keep steadily on. I determined to take the mid-day meal at a wayside hostelry at Dollingham. The inn was a clean place, where we could get a decent meal and Mistress Dorothy might rest for an hour before re-starting.

What had happened during the last two or three days had convinced me that the country was alive with workers on each side for the opposing factions. Things political had come to a head. Before long men must declare themselves openly, either for the King or for William of Orange. Toasts that were now drunk silently would ere long be shouted at the top of the voice. In the meantime there was no scruple as to the use of weapons. A

man might be walking abroad one day, and be in prison the next, without knowing on what ground he was thus incarcerated ; or worse still, a sword through the ribs, and the first ditch for his grave, might be a more ready and effective way of disposing of an adversary.

It seemed strange to be riding with these thoughts in one's mind. It was the first of November, as sunny a day as one could wish to see at that time of the year. Rooks and pigeons were on the wing ; over the higher ground hawks were to be seen circling, every now and then rising up into the sky, or suddenly swooping to the ground. Except for a few labourers and men with teams of horses, we hardly passed a living creature. Yet I was perfectly certain that our course was guessed, probably known, to those who would leave no stone unturned to frustrate our journey. The three men who had escaped the previous night were not likely to abandon their intention ; in fact, it was only natural to assume that their anger would be stimulated by what had happened. I had wounded the leader of them, and the man who had no doubt acted as spy and guide, Lady Alice Lisle's quondam servant and betrayer, had been done to death by Abel Salker.

In addition, as Churchill had informed me, there were roving bands of horse-soldiers patrolling the country. Many of these were Irish whom Tyrconnell had raised, and sent into England to help in carrying out King James's schemes for the subversion of the liberties of England.

James had drafted these troops into the West as the most reliable part of his army. He regarded

that section of England as tainted with disloyalty. The spirit of Monmouth's rebellion still survived in Dorset, Devon, Somerset, and Cornwall. There was some probability that, if William of Orange landed anywhere in the South, he would come to one of the Western ports.

We reached Dollingham at two o'clock without any incident or contretemps. We might have been merely travellers, journeying on business or pleasure through the country. Dollingham is a small market town. It was Wednesday—a market was being held, and the place was full of agriculturists. We passed droves of cattle and sheep as we rode through the lane leading up to the principal street. The inn-yard was full of horses, fastened with halters to hooks along the walls. Others were in stalls, and vehicles of all kinds were in the centre of the square yard attached to the inn.

Donald Duvain had arrived first and made what arrangements he could for our comfortable disposal. Mistress Lisle and I rode up to the front door. As we did so I glanced through the window of one of the parlours, which ranged right and left of the main entrance. I caught a glimpse of a man standing a little way back in the room, but looking out on the street. He was of fine stature, and from this fact would have attracted my attention in any circumstances. A man who has fought in campaigns sees other men with different eyes from those of the ordinary citizen. He thinks of them as possible antagonists. He measures their strength; he calculates the length of their sword-arms. Ah! what was the matter with this tall stranger's right

shoulder? His arm was out of his tunic. The empty sleeve hung down.

I leaped from my horse, Diomed, and to Mistress Lisle's astonishment, instead of assisting her to alight, rushed up the steps of the inn. Unfortunately they were occupied by burly farmers and cattle-dealers, who impeded my progress at every step. I am afraid that I brushed them on one side somewhat unceremoniously. One man stood in my way—a fellow with a red face, who had evidently been drinking. He had a whip in his hand, and a truculent expression on his countenance.

"Where are you pushing to, master? You seem to be in a mortal hurry, elbowing honest gentlemen as if they were cattle in the ring."

I gave him a cuff on the side of his face which sent him spinning. He would have fallen but for his friends, who caught him opportunely. Recovering himself, he rushed at me with bull-like fury. I stepped half on one side, and gave him another buffet. His fist had only just missed my nose. My blood was up, and I cast caution to the wind. This time he cannoned against the side of the steps, and pitched over them into the street.

There were angry murmurs from the crowd of horse-coopers, at seeing one of their number served in this summary fashion. I must own, on reflection, that I was to a certain extent to blame. The man had purposely got in the road, but at the same time my abrupt manner of forcing my way into the inn, without any explanation, afforded him some justification.

It is probable that the affair would have assumed

considerable proportions, but at this moment my two servants and Abel Salker elbowed their several ways to my side. The look of my following awed the company. Donald Duvain with his enormous stature and massive body, and Duncan Macalister with his sinewy strength, bearing traces, too, of many fights, formed an impressive body-guard. Yet I believe the men in the street and on the steps, as well as within the porch of the inn, would have shown fight, had we three been alone. It was Abe Salker, as I was perfectly conscious, who visibly impressed them. He grinned at them one by one, showing his teeth like fangs. The tunic that he wore was too short in the sleeve ; it had probably shrunk with long wear and much exposure to the rain ; it disclosed not only his enormous wrists, but portions of his hairy, brawny forearms. Abe looked round on the company. One by one they edged away. The man I had struck down came back to the foot of the steps, sobered and terribly angry, ready to attack me again.

Abe stepped down to him : his arms worked convulsively, as if without control or volition on his part ; his grin broadened ; his eyes gleamed under the shaggy locks of his matted hair. The man looked at him, seemed about to attack him ; then he stepped back, back. Abe advanced : the quicker the man retired, the quicker Salker went on. Then, with a cry of fear, turning round, the drover flung down his whip and ran for his life.

The whole scene struck me as so ludicrous I could almost have laughed. However, I had sense enough to call Abe back. We had won our victory, and

had sufficient on our hands without pursuing this quarrel—in which, as I have said, I was partly in the wrong—to the finish.

Bidding my servants see to Mistress Lisle, I turned to complete my errand in the search for the tall man with the wounded shoulder. This time no opposition was offered to my progress. The men in the porch and in the passage lined up against the wall, leaving the centre free. I darted into the parlour, in which the man I was in search of had been standing when I saw him from the road. There were about twenty men in the room drinking at the various tables, or standing discussing bargains by the open hearth.

I looked at each of these faces and scanned their forms. There was not a wounded man amongst them; evidently my quarry had left the room. I rushed back into the passage and tried two other rooms, then the kitchen, to the surprise of the cook and wenches. I questioned the buxom landlady, adorned with blue ribbons in her starched cap.

She thought she had noticed a stranger such as I described, but she had not seen him since she served him with drink—a pot of cider—a quarter of an hour before. The landlady had noticed that he had taken it with his left hand. She thought he had said something about a fall from a horse.

I asked whether he had anybody with him. Yes, she believed he came with two or three friends, but there were so many coming and going, and she had to look after the money so sharply, she barely noticed whom she served.

"Is there a way out at the back?" I asked.

"Oh yes, sir ; there are stables, a coach-house, and outbuildings at the rear."

I felt sure that I should not now come across my man, but I searched all the places at the back of the inn to make certain.

Like so many country inns, this one at Dolling-ham combined a farmyard with it. There were middens and byres beyond the coach-house to the rear. Further on was a country lane. There were marks of horse-hoofs, but the weather had been so dry of late that it was impossible to glean anything from them. I turned back again into the inn ; my quarry had escaped.

## CHAPTER XVI

### ABE SALKER PROVIDES HIMSELF WITH A WEAPON

AS I could find no traces of the man with the wounded shoulder, I first went to see whether comfortable accommodation had been secured for Mistress Lisle. The landlady had done the best in her power under the circumstances, the inn being so crowded. She had given her a small sitting-room near to the kitchen, generally in the private use of the family. A chicken was on the spit, being prepared for her meal, which I was to partake of with her. While this was being got ready I went into the front yard—ostensibly to ascertain whether the horses were being properly looked after, really to question the ostler.

I found the latter with very little difficulty. He was busy bringing the horses out for a group of farmers, who were about to ride away, having finished their business. I waited until he was free, and as I stood in the corner of the yard I noticed the red-faced man, with whom I had had the quarrel half an hour before, looking in at the gate. I determined to take no notice of him—in fact, to pretend not to see him, unless he obtruded himself upon me. The incident, with the delay it caused,

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had cost me enough already. I had nothing to gain by its recurrence.

In a few minutes, seeing the ostler free, I walked across to him, and inquired where our horses were located. I found that they had a small barn to themselves. The man told me that Abe Salker --I recognised his rather unflattering description as fitting Mistress Lisle's body-servant--was in the stall with the horses. One of my servants had brought Abe some bacon, bread, and a quart of cider. I recognised the sagacity of the man in the act. Combined with all his brute's strength he had a curious cunning, which served himself and his mistress in good stead. He had thought, in fact, of something which had not occurred to me, namely, that we were vulnerable to attack through our horses. He had determined to remain with them, to make sure they were not tampered with.

Pleased with this act of wise forethought, I slipped a crown into the ostler's hand to quicken his memory, and proceeded to ask him about the man with the wounded arm.

"Did you notice any one come to the inn with his arm in a sling under his tunic?"

"A big man, sir, riding a bay horse with one white stocking?"

"I don't know about the horse, but that is the man."

"He had two companions with him, sir."

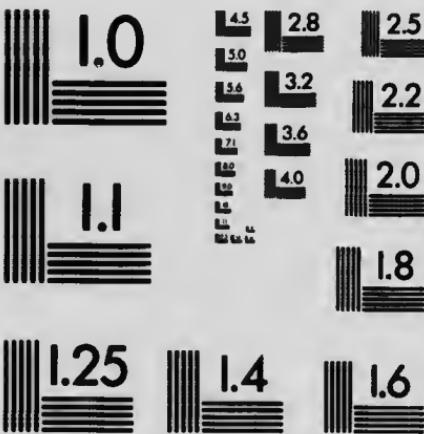
"Yes, yes!" I cried eagerly. "Can you tell me where they are?"

"I believe the horses are in some loose boxes



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over there. It was all the accommodation we had when they arrived, just in the thick of the fair."

"Have they left?"

"Not that I am aware of, sir. I will go and see."

The ostler walked across the yard to a wooden shanty at the further end. I followed him.

He opened the door and looked in. Then he swore.

It was as I had expected. "They are not there?"

"No, sir."

I saw by his expression that he was annoyed, and guessed its cause.

"They have not remembered the ostler?" I remarked.

"No, sir." Under his breath, he wished them at perdition.

I gave him another crown and returned to the inn.

An hour later Mistress Lisle signified that she was ready to start. I gave orders to have the horses brought round. A few minutes later I strolled into the yard. Most of the drovers had now left. The ostler had brought out the horses of my own party—Diomed for myself, and two iron grays of great strength for Donald Duvain and Duncan Macalister. I had left Sultan behind me in the stable at Ash House. I told the men to walk the horses round to the front of the inn. I, myself, waited to settle with the ostler.

In a few minutes he and Abe came out with the other three horses belonging to Mistress Lisle. The ostler walked between the two side-saddles, while Abe led his own. I was surprised to see that the former had a great red welt across his face.

"How did you come by that mark, my friend, since I saw you an hour agone?"

"Mr. Dennis Grapthorn gave it me, sir."

"Who may Mr. Dennis Grapthorn be," I asked, "and why did he strike you?"

"He is the horse-cooper you knocked down, sir. He saw you slip some money into my hand, and he gave me this, he said, as a little extra change. I will be even with him yet."

I looked across at Salker and noticed that he had a new club strapped to his saddle.

"Where did you get that club, Abe?" I inquired.

"I bought it, Captain Lesterne, from Jim Nounce, here," nodding at the ostler.

"What use is that ugly thing going to be to you stupid?" I asked.

Abe looked up at me with a shrewd glance from under his brows.

"I shall find a use for it, sir, I expect, by and by."

I felt sure that something was afoot, although at present I did not understand what. Abe had shot a glance at the ostler, as he said the last part of the sentence, which indicated an understanding between them.

Directly he had spoken Salker moved on with his horse. Jim Nounce pretended to be fumbling with one of the saddles. He showed me something, as if for my advice, and then whispered:

"There is mischief in the wind, sir. That fellow Grapthorn, as big a rascal as there is unhung—thief, liar, and drunkard—has been talking with the man you asked me about. Quietly they have been getting a company together, fellows you could

pick up for a crown to do any sort of dirty job that was going. There are always plenty of these, as you know, sir, at a fair ; drivers and such like."

" Why didn't you come to tell me ? "

" It would have been as much as my life was worth to be seen coming into the inn."

" Yet you are talking to me now," I suggested.

" Because they have gone, but not for good. You will see them again, or I am much mistaken. I heard a whisper of a name when I was in one of the stables behind a horse, and fortunately they didn't see me. Just before you get to the Stour there is a bit of a valley with trees on bo' th sides, and a lot of furze and bracken where men can lie hid. It's a nasty place, even in broad daylight always gloomy, but by the time you get there it will be well-nigh dark. ' Gorse Chine ' they call it about here."

" You think they will attack us there, Nounce ? "

" I am sure of it, sir."

" Is there no other route we can take ? "

" No, sir, except by going back. Your honour wouldn't do that ? "

" No ! that I shall not. How many rascals do you think the man with the wounded arm has picked up ? "

" About half a dozen, sir, I should say ; but, bless you, I can tell you they're not game for much if any one stands up to them."

" Thank you," and I transferred a couple of gold pieces from my pocket to his. " I think we shall be able to account for ourselves when we get to Gorse Chine, but we might have been served badly if taken by surprise."

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With a friendly nod, I left him, and went round to the front of the inn. Mistress Lisle and her woman stood on the top step. The ostler followed me with their horses. Abe was standing by his, thoughtfully feeling the knob of his club. It was an uncomfortable-looking weapon ; he evidently thought it might be of service later on.

## CHAPTER XVII

### GORSE CHINE

GORSE CHINE, the place which Jim Nounce had indicated as likely to be the scene of an attack upon us, was well known to myself, and, indeed, to all travellers on the Salisbury road. I pictured it as I rode along.

For some distance on either hand there were pine woods. Then the road took a dip down towards the river Stour. It ran between shelving banks; these were covered with gorse and bracken, enough to conceal any number of men. It was an ideal spot for a surprise, and, indeed, had been used for such a purpose on many an occasion. Isolated travellers had been robbed and murdered there; the Salisbury coach had been stopped more than once; and of late arrangements had been made for outriders to serve as an escort from the last stopping-place before the river to Welford Inn, a mile on this side.

Just above the gorse was some bare white rock, very conspicuous in the daytime from its contrast to the fir-trees above and to the bushes beneath. This formation made it extremely difficult for any one in the road below, or concealed in the gorse,

to make his way to the top. It was easy to drop down into the bushes, but the sheer face of the rock defied the grasp of fingers to scale it. Barely higher than a man, it sufficed for this purpose.

Out of my knowledge of the locality, through which I had passed some hundreds of times, I evolved my plan of campaign. I left the details to be worked out with my subordinates when we reached Welfold Inn.

Mistress Lisle was evidently somewhat tired. She spoke but little, and rode with less elasticity, less spring in the saddle, than she had done earlier in the day. I regretted that necessity compelled what was impending, but it could not be avoided. When we had gone about five miles along the road, and were within another couple of miles of Welfold Inn, I turned to Mistress Lisle.

"You know this district, I suppose?"

"Not well," she answered. "Of course, I passed through it a few days ago. That was for the first time. I am afraid my head was so full of my coming visit to Lord Churchill that I did not especially mark the features of the journey. I 'eft that to Salker, who has a wonderful instinct for finding his way even in an unfamiliar country."

"I think you must remember Gorse Chine—the long dip which you come to after you pass the Stour from the Salisbury side?"

"Yes, I remember that perfectly; we went through it about mid-day. The sun was shining on the gorse; I was struck with its beauty. The firs on both sides and beyond are like the aisles of some spacious cathedral."

"It will look different when we come to it shortly, for the sun will have set. The Chine is gloomy and sinister enough when darkness begins to brood over the land. I have been through it almost every hour in the twenty-four, and can speak from experience."

Mistress Lisle was always very quick to detect a meaning in a tone, although that meaning was not conveyed in the words themselves.

"You are saying this for some purpose, Captain Lesterne?"

"Yes," I replied; "I heard from the ostler at the inn where we rested, that an attack was likely to be made upon us in the Chine. It has been organised by the man with the wounded arm, who is dogging our footsteps, or rather preceding us on the way. He has found an ally in the drover whom I knocked off the steps at Dollingham. Do not disturb yourself, Mistress Lisle; although their numbers are three to our one I have no doubt that we shall render a good account of ourselves. The difficulty," I said with a half smile, turning to her, "is yourself."

"In what way?" she asked.

"I should like to persuade you with your woman to remain at Welfold Inn, until we have cleared a way for you through the Chine."

"I shall certainly not be left behind. Do you think I am afraid?"

"I am certain you are not, but a woman in a fray needs a man to defend her. Our numbers are so small that we cannot spare any advantage to the enemy."

For answer Mistress Lisle drew a long stiletto-dagger from the leathern belt she ever wore at her waist. "If needs be, I can give a good account of myself, Captain Lesterne. Look to your own fighting; I shall never fall alive into the hands of any of Barillon's servants. I know full well what my fate would be."

As I have said, Mistress Lisle was very tired. She allowed a little shudder to pass through her frame as she said the last words. I asked no questions, but if anything could have steeled my determination to see her safely through, not only now, but as long as she remained under my charge, that shudder, and the words which preceded it, would have effected the result.

By this time the sun had set beneath the horizon. A yellow light shone in the western sky; very soon this would disappear and darkness come on rapidly. Already the cold was intensifying; it promised, I thought, to freeze later on. We should come to the Chine at about the darkest time of the day,

the sun had set for more than an hour  
the evening was deepening into night. As  
opened, this condition of affairs suited exactly  
what was in my mind.

At Welfold Inn we stopped to water our horses. I made careful inquiries, but without seeming to attach special importance to it, as to whether a troop had passed by recently. The landlord said that none had called at the house. I did not admire the shifty look in his eyes, and felt sure he had been primed with the answer before hand. While I kept him in play, Duncan Macalister,

in accordance with some directions I had given him, got the truth out of the solitary man who did odd jobs about the inn and the outbuildings.

Nine horsemen had gone by that way an hour earlier. They had had drinks at the inn, and the leader was engaged for some time in conversation with the host.

Macalister, in addition to acquiring this information, secured certain things from the man which I wanted for the work we had to do. He had given him a liberal present, equivalent, probably, to three months of his wages.

On leaving the inn I made a different disposition of our small band from that which had obtained earlier in the expedition. I sent Duncan Macalister and Donald Duvain on in front. I rode, as before, with Mistress Lisle on my left hand. Her woman followed just behind us; at the back came Salker, guarding the rear. Some half-mile from the inn was a clump of beech-trees on the left-hand side of the road; here it would be pitch dark, as many of the leaves still remained on the trees. My two servants were to await us at this spot; it was safer to issue my final instructions here than it would have been at the inn itself. I had also another reason.

I felt sure that the innkeeper was in league with the men who were about to attack us. I did not choose that he should be in a position to give a signal to the enemy. I turned to Duncan Macalister.

"Have you got that piece of rope?" I inquired.

"Yes, sir." He held out a coil to me, which

I could see was what I wanted. I handed it over to Salker.

"Abe, remain here for a quarter of an hour; if the landlord of the inn we have just left comes up, tie him to the nearest tree in such a way that he will not escape without assistance. If he is not here within that time, join us at the entrance of the Chine."

"I understand, sir."

I then gave certain instructions to Macalister and Donald Duvain, the result of which will appear later on.

Mistress Lisle laughed; the humour of the situation struck her. I was glad to find that she had still some room for mirth.

"That is a capital plan of yours, Captain Lesterne. I hope it will come off just as you have designed it."

"I have not much doubt about that," I answered. Then something occurred to me. As we were moving away I turned back to Abe. "Don't hang the man," I remarked.

Salker was silent.

"Do you hear me?"

"Yes, sir."

"I shall not leave you behind unless you undertake to do just what I tell you, and nothing more."

"Very well, sir," Abe replied sulkily.

It was lucky for the innkeeper that that idea had occurred to me. My intervention certainly saved his life, although perhaps the fate Salker designed for him was the one he merited.

After we had ridden for half an hour the road began to dip down. The fir woods spread themselves

out on either hand. Before us was a gloomy defile like the very jaws of death. Sending Duncan Macalister and Donald Duvain on in front, with strict orders to go cautiously, I followed with the two women just behind. I had drawn my sword from its sheath, and rode with it ready to use at a moment's notice. I did not, however, anticipate any attack here. Horses and men could not be concealed so effectively amongst the pine trunks, whereas below the undergrowth was sufficient to hide a company of horse-soldiers.

As soon as we got to the first clumps of bracken the two servants dismounted. They fastened their horses to a tree apiece, and scrambled up the bank. We three on horseback sat perfectly still and waited. It was very cold ; the night wind stirred in the tops of the firs, making the branches creak. It suggested the sound of men hanging in chains—a gruesome thought with that dark ravine before me. Some big bird swooped down close to us and then passed on. It was probably an owl, for I heard it hoot lower down, nearer the river. I was glad that I had chosen Diomed for this expedition. The owl would have sent Sultan galloping madly into the heart of the Chine, in which case I should not have lived to tell the tale.

Diomed stood the ordeal perfectly, but Mistress Lisle's horse plunged a little. I backed mine alongside hers, and put out my right hand, having transferred the sword to the left. Mistress Lisle was a splendid horsewoman and had already quieted her steed. Our hands met in the darkness. I pressed hers.

"Courage," I said.

"I am not afraid."

The touch of our hands gave us the sense of comradeship; yet even at that moment, preoccupied as I was, my thoughts went to Lady Lettice. The woman in Mistress Lisle brought to me the thought of another who had likewise shown her trust in me by the touch of a hand. With Mistress Lisle it was just comradeship and nothing more. With Lady Lettice it might be—well, all the world. It is curious that all this passed through my mind, I may almost add for the first time, there, under the soothng trees, as the night girt us about and danger lay hidden somewhere in the darkness.

Almost immediately after this I heard the slow trot of a horse coming from the rear.

"It is Salker, I am sure. I do not like to go and meet him, as it will leave you and your woman alone, yet he ought to be cautioned not to let himself be heard."

"I will meet him, sir," Carder said, and turned her horse's head up the road.

"Your woman has some spirit," I remarked.

"She has learnt it in a hard school," Mistress Lisle replied; "she and I together."

There was not a little pathos in her tone, which made my heart go out to her in sympathy.

"You are young, Mistress Lisle," I said, "and may have many years of happiness and peace, when these clouds have all blown over."

"I do not dare to look forward so far. I see only one vision clear and distinct, and with that I am content."

"What is that?" I asked.

"The hour when King James, who did my aunt to death, and I meet again." Mistress Lisle said these words so low that they barely reached my ears, quiet as was the night about us. She was saying them, I felt sure, between set lips. Strength of purpose, set determination, vibrated in those low tones.

"You can hate," I put in almost involuntarily.

As I said the words I felt with what tenacity her nature would have loved. It seemed perverse fate that this girl, so young and beautiful, should be giving up her whole existence to revenge, when it might have been filled with something so widely different.

A minute later my reflections were interrupted by the arrival on the scene of Dame Carder and Salker. The latter drew up his horse next to mine.

"I have done your bidding, sir," he said. "The innkeeper will remain where he is until someone releases him." He did not add he had done a little more than my bidding, and I asked no questions.

By this time I was listening acutely. I was expecting to hear something. The time of waiting, during which nothing can be done, is ever to me the most difficult of all. I was dependent on the ability of my two servants to carry out the instructions they had received. If they failed, a different course would have to be pursued.

Suddenly I felt sure I heard a crackle, then another, then another. The sound came from the right-hand side first, the one Duncan Macalister had chosen. Donald Duvain was not far behind.

They had fired the bracken and the dry parts in

the centres of the gorse bushes. There had been no rain for some time, so that both the fern and the wood made ready material for a conflagration.

Almost immediately, flames shot up in all directions. Directly afterwards the two servants sprang down into the road and unhitched their horses. I had arranged that Donald Duvain and Abe Salker should lead down the pass, while I followed with the women, Duncan Macalister bringing up the rear.

The difficulty was with the horses. They were a quiet lot, or I should not have attempted the affair at all; but even the steadiest of animals are frightened by fire, especially when it resolves itself into tongues of flame shooting forth on all sides.

We went forward about fifty paces. The gorse had been fired at some little distance from the road on both sides. The wind coming down at the back swept the plain before us, and increased its volume every second. It was an extraordinary sight, the blazing bushes showing up the white metal of the road, and the flames darting up into the air against the blue-black of the vault of heaven.

The excitement of the horses and the wildness of the scene had their effect on the spirits of all the party. Abe Salker and Donald Duvain advanced so rapidly, that I had to shout to them at the top of my voice to hold in. We did not want to reach the centre of the Chine before the flames had done their work. They must show us the road, and at the same time drive our adversaries from their hiding places. I had calculated that the recruits, headed by Dennis Grapthorn, who had twice felt the weight of my fist, would be half drunk, and that the tension

of waiting would already have played upon their nerves. The sudden rising of the fire and its onrush towards them would create a panic. They were more likely to fly for safety than to give their attention to us. In these suppositions lay my hope of success, and they proved correct.

We had reached the middle of the Chine when we saw a commotion in front. A group of horses and men appeared on the road from both sides. The light was just sufficient to enable us on the higher ground to see something of what was going on. It was evident that some difference of opinion had arisen. There was a clamour of voices, mingled with the sound of plunging horses. At this sight Abe could restrain himself no longer. He yelled out, with voice enough to be heard far up the river, which flowed along at the bottom of the ravine. Putting his horse to the gallop, and, brandishing his great club, he dashed down towards the men below.

Donald Duvain, with his drawn sword in his hand, was hardly a whit behind. It was all done more quickly than I had intended, but nothing now remained except to follow the leading file as quickly as possible. Duncan Macalister, finding that all the danger was in front, closed up to my bridle-hand, so that the women were in the rear of the party. He and I, however, had little part in the fray that followed.

Grapthorn and his men, at the sound of Abe's war-cry, did not offer fight at all. They simply turned and fled downwards towards the bottom of the Chine. What became of them afterwards I cannot tell. We saw them no more. The three men who had insti-

gated the attack were of a sterner mould. They, at any rate, with swords drawn, spurred their horses to meet Abe. The man I had wounded was of rare courage. He had taken his weapon in his left hand. Probably he could use both with equal dexterity. His fate was sudden and complete. Abe struck his sword out of his hand, and with one blow cracked his skull, felling him to the ground, a dead man.

Donald Duvain wounded one of the others ; then he and his comrade, seeing their leader fall, turned their horses' heads in the direction of the Stour. Donald followed in hot pursuit, and, catching up the rearmost, killed him with a sword-thrust right through the back.

Duncan Macalister had by this time left my side, no doubt not a little chagrined that he had been left out of the fray. Donald being engaged in extracting his sword, Macalister passed him like a whirlwind. The last I saw of him was turning round a corner just behind the flying horseman whom he was pursuing.

I learned afterwards what happened. The man tried to get to the bridge, but Duncan by a deft movement headed him off. They crossed swords, and in a couple of minutes that of the unknown was whirled out of his hands. The latter, rather than surrender, jumped into the river with his horse. He was carried away by the flood, and probably drowned.

We waited to bury the two men who had fallen. In one of them I recognised the spy I had dragged from the tapestry at Cawston Castle. Then, taking with us the two horses which were now riderless, we rode on towards Stourton,

Mistress Lisle thanked us all most graciously for having brought her safely through. It was a very weary maid that went to her bed that night in the great guest-chamber of the Swan and Cygnet. As for me, I sat up thinking out the whole scene over again far into the night. My brain was too excited to rest.

The three body-servants had become great allies through the fight they had sustained together. As they drank their cups, I could hear them laughing deep in the room next to my own.

After all, upon me had been the responsibility, not on them, of bringing Mistress Lisle safely to her destination.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE FRACAS AT THE GOLDEN LION

I AROUSED myself the next morning with a jump which nearly caused me to fall out of bed. I thought I was at Ash House, and that the thatch was on fire, and I sleeping just under it. I could hardly believe my senses when I looked round, sitting up in the bed, to find that the apartment was free of smoke.

It was a room with a whitewashed ceiling, rather low, with two great beams across it, likewise washed over. I remembered then where I was, namely, in the Swan and Cygnet, at Stourton. I knew, now, what it was that had given me the idea of fire. The smell of the burning gorse and bracken was in my nostrils still, and hung about my hair.

It brought back to me all the scene of the previous night. I saw the flames licking up the dry fern and furze, spreading in all directions, eagerly seizing upon its prey. Sights which had been blurred by the excitement of the moment, when actually passed through, came to me with more distinctness, now that I could mentally recall all that happened. I could understand what a sudden, swift surprise .. must have afforded to

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the men lying with their horses in ambush, when the flame made its appearance, curling round at their backs, stimulated by the breeze, which concentrated in the gorge. The elements had favoured my design and completed its success.

I estimated the courage of the three men at its true value. I had not given them their full meed of appreciation when the fray was enacting. It must have taken no small amount of determination to stand and fight, when their allies had sought safety in flight. With the fire bewildering them, and having to face men coming from the higher ground, in itself a great advantage to horsemen, they had acted like heroes. Combined with my satisfaction at the success of the manœuvre there was a strand of quite other feeling. I regretted that the fortune of war should have caused the deaths of three brave men, for I could not hope that the one who had taken to the river had fared better than the others.

I was not sorry to escape these thoughts, so I dressed rapidly and went downstairs. Mistress Lisle must have been up some time, for she came in at the inn door as I descended the main staircase into the hall. The fresh morning air had brightened her eyes and lent a tinge of health to her cheeks. Her beautiful hair strayed low on her forehead. She was a pretty picture, which even I could not help admiring, although she moved me not. My master, when minded to rally me, has ever called me cold. But I have begun to think of late that the appellation may not always fit.

Every mile that took me nearer to Salisbury

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brought me consciously closer to the one woman who filled my thoughts to an extent I had ever believed unlikely.

"I hope you have recovered from the fatigue and excitement of yesterday, madam," I said.

She laughed. "I am feeling quite fresh and ready to renew our journey. I am sorry for the fate of those men who suffered at our hands last night, but I cannot help feeling the relief of losing the sense of their espionage. They have dogged my footsteps for a long time, and I have always known that it was possible I might fall into their hands."

"I can quite understand what you say," I replied. "It is bad enough for a man to be continually spied upon, and to expect an attack from a hidden and unscrupulous foe at any moment, but, at any rate, he has his good sword to fight for his life in an emergency; a woman has to depend upon others for her defence."

"I have not depended in vain," she said, and held out her hand. The grasp she gave me, I knew, was of comrade to comrade, not of girl to man. "I shall be able to tell my Lord Churchill that you have well fulfilled the trust he imposed upon you, and have taken good care of me. That was a brilliant idea of yours yesterday, firing the fern and gorse. I cannot think how you came to conceive it."

"I am glad it was so effective. I once saw horses driven in a wild stampede before a moor on fire, when the dry stalks of ling, heather, and gorse blazed behind them. I think this must have lain at the back of my mind, until something prompted me

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to use it to dislodge our hidden foes from the Chine."

In less than an hour we were all in the saddle again, and, with two intervals for rest and refreshment, we pursued our way steadily towards our destination. We were now on the chalk roads, and the long dry season caused them to give us much discomfort.

We began now, after mid-day, to meet bodies of horsemen from time to time. Some of them were travellers moving west, others were companies of soldiers on the march. I exchanged greetings with the officers of the latter, but they were reticent about affording any information. I noticed, however, that there seemed some understanding between one or two of the leaders we encountered and Mistress Lisle. I discovered it rather by what she left undone than by what she did. She a little over-acted her part, pretending to take no notice, acting quite differently from the way in which she passed others of whom she had no cognisance. Once I said to her: "There seems to be a concerted movement in this direction."

She smiled. "Wise men go from east to west," she said.

"All men are not wise, yet they go, too, some of them."

She glanced at me still with her face lit up.

"You are a shrewd observer, Mr. Equerry."

"I have been trained in the school of my Lord Churchill. Yet do I not know all that is passing through your mind, Mistress Lisle."

"If you did, you would be wiser than I."

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"How do you arrive at that conclusion?

"Because you would know all that was in both our minds, having your own to commence with."

"That is true," I replied ; "I had not thought of that."

I saw that she was fencing with me. I wondered whether she was still in doubt as to the side Lord Churchill would eventually take—had taken, in fact, by this time, no doubt, without our being cognisant of it. His side was my side. That, Mistress Lisle knew quite well.

Then a fresh thought struck me ; I had noticed particularly the look of satisfaction, almost of gladness, on my companion's face when I met her coming in at the inn door that morning. She had been out in the street. At the time, I had ascribed the brightness in her eyes to the morning air, and to the satisfaction of being rid of the enemies who had dogged her steps. She had allowed me to accept these reasons as complete. It came into my mind now that there might have been a third ; had Mistress Lisle received any news before I left my room ? Looking back upon it, the idea seemed probable. I knew her to be in the inmost circle of the conspiracy which was stretching out into every shire in England. If any movement was going on, her uncle, Count Zulestein, might be depended upon to make her acquainted with it.

These considerations made me feel a certain coldness towards her. I liked not the secretiveness she was showing, if my suppositions were correct. I had been perfectly open with her, while she was not displaying a like confidence in me.

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It is astonishing how quickly a shrewd woman reads the sentiments at the back of a man's mind. Mistress Lisle gave me an illustration of this immediately.

"Do not think, Captain Lesterne, that I do not trust you absolutely, but I am a woman under authority. I have to do exactly as I am told; neither more nor less. My instinct is to tell you everything I know, to consult you on all points, but at present I am held back by directions I cannot contravene."

Her frankness removed my irritation. After all, she was playing, as I well knew, a most difficult part in a unique time.

At three o'clock in the afternoon we rode into Dinton. I had expected to reach it an hour earlier, but the dust, trying the horses, had delayed us not a little. Occasionally, too, we had to wait while a troop of horsemen passed us. I had not intended to stop in the village for more than a few minutes, during which time the horses could be watered and we could partake of some light refreshment ourselves. But a general has to be guided by the condition of his following. The strength of the chain is in the weakest, not the strongest link. I saw that both Mistress Lisle and her woman could not possibly go further without at least an hour's rest. The heavy-weight carriers, likewise, under Donald Duvain and Abe Salker, were exhibiting unmistakable signs of distress.

I therefore made up my mind that it was indispensable to dine at the May-pole, the only inn in the village, and that a small one, and gave instructions to that effect to the servants.

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As we rode into the inn-yard we found a squad of soldiers taking their food, while their horses were being attended to. When Mistress Lisle and I entered the inn, I was chagrined to find that there was no private room in which we could dine alone. A party of gentlemen, with an officer in high command at their head, had the small parlour. The larger one, which ran the whole length at the back of the building, also accommodated a number of gentlemen. The landlord apologised, but could only offer us a small table near the fireplace of the larger apartment.

I had to accept this, and, as we proceeded to our places, glanced round the room. In one corner was an officer, evidently of some rank, dining by himself. A short distance from our table was another much larger one. Round this were seated four men in uniform. They were drinking, and laughed loudly as I entered, evidently at some remark made by a florid man who appeared to be at the head of the party. I recognised him at once, although I had never actually spoken to him. I was not sure if he would know me. He was a certain Captain Destrier, a particular dislike of Lord Churchill's, a bully, a roué, and a gamester. He had evidently been drinking very freely before we came on the scene. It was certainly not a company into which I should have preferred to take any gentlewoman.

There was no help for it. However, I laid my sword on a chair by my side to be ready for any emergency.

The landlord of the May-pole served us himself with remarkable celerity. I had preferred a cold

pasty, with Mistress Lisle's concurrence, rather than waiting for anything hot. I ordered some mulled wine, thinking it best for my companion in her tired condition. This came in with the pastry, and I was glad to see Mistress Lisle partake of it.

The landlord stood at the back of my chair, and seemed loth to depart even after we were served. He spoke of the weather, and of other trivial things, apparently without much thought as to what he was saying. At first, I set it down to mere politeness on the part of the host of the May-pole, but in a few minutes it dawned upon me that he was trying to screen our table from the notice of those sitting at the one behind us. Probably Captain Destrier's reputation as a bully and a blackguard was well known to the landlord, and he may have rightly calculated that my having a lady under protection would afford a ground for some rudeness. Possibly Destrier had been at this wayside inn before, as the regiment with which he was serving was quartered in Salisbury.

We ate our meal in comparative quiet, and presently the landlord, finding no further excuse to remain, his stock of conversation being exhausted, retired with a bow. To tell the truth, I had momentarily forgotten Destrier's presence. The talk at his table had not been so noisy while the innkeeper was in the room. I had been interested in noticing the profile of the gentleman dining by himself near the window. He was a man about seven or eight and twenty years of age, dressed with scrupulous care, of singularly handsome mien. His attitude and whole bearing suggested a certain pride and confi-

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dence in himself, but not to such an extent as to be displeasing.

When Mistress Lisle had partaken of the pasty, and had yielded to my persuasion to drink something like her share of the warmed wine, I noticed that her weariness sensibly yielded. She was a woman of great recuperative power, and in this her indomitable spirit helped not a little.

As soon as her fatigue was dissipated, she began to take an interest in her environment. I could see that her eyes rested likewise upon the stranger at the further end of the apartment, and not without favour. She recognised so many officers during the latter part of the journey, that, intercepting her glance, I inquired:

"You know that gentleman, Mistress Lisle?"

"No," she replied, "I have been trying to recall his face from among the many I have seen, but without success. He seems to me to answer to the description of a man whose acquaintance I hope to make. Yet, probably, I may be mistaken."

"To whom are you referring?"

"Colonel Fitzroy Allayne, Lord Cranworth's son."

It happened, when she said these names, there was silence for the first time at the table behind me, so that her words sounded more clearly than they otherwise would have done. Mistress Lisle had a sweet voice, but a somewhat penetrating one. The room, although it was long, was low, which, as I have often noticed, tends to make sounds travel further than they are intended to do.

At any rate, as the names were uttered the gentleman by the window started and half turned. Before

this he had seemed lost in thought, paying no attention to what was going on in our part of the parlour. It was a time when men of light and leading were full of anxiety. Decision must shortly come to them, if, indeed, it had not already done so, as to which side they would support in the impending conflict. If a civilian is contemplating change of allegiance it is a grave enough matter, but for a soldier to do so is infinitely more. As I had watched this young man's face, I had fancied that some such problem was passing through his mind. Under what circumstances, if any, is it justifiable for a man wearing the King's uniform to leave the service of one master for another?

Those were days in which many men found it possible, within the four corners of their sense of honour, to do so, but with some the operation was more difficult than it was with others. My master had found his justification in the King's determination to commit him to the Tower, but before that, he, like many others, had been moved in the same direction by the unfaithfulness James had pursued to the promises of his coronation. He had, with all solemnity, testified his allegiance to the constitution of England, knowing full wel' that not a jot of what he had promised would be observed, unless he was compelled by a force he could not resist.

If, then, the King could thus violate all his most sacred undertakings, was not the same freedom permissible to his subjects? Then, again, the story of the birth of the young Prince, which not one man in a hundred credited, had shaken the allegiance of many who up to now had resisted all efforts to wean

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them from the Royal cause. As I have said, it seemed to me, watching this young but dignified officer, that he was facing the problem which, at this period, was stirring in the minds of nearly all men of his rank.

If Mistress Lisle was right in her surmise that this was Colonel Allayne, my interest in him would be tenfold increased ; it was at his father's house that the Lady Lettice had taken refuge, if the plan her father had formed had been carried out.

These reflections filled my mind to the exclusion of everything else, and for two or three minutes, perhaps longer, I was lost in thought, not conscious of my environment. I had forgotten all about Captain Destrier and his crew behind me. As my back was turned to them, and they had been remarkably quiet of late, there was nothing to attract my attention. Afterwards, when I came to think it all over, I understood much more than I did at the time.

Captain Destrier had recognised me, as I did him. He knew me to be the friend and equerry of John Churchill, the man he hated more than any one else. My master had on more than one occasion shown unmistakably his contempt for the person and character of Destrier. From the time that I had entered the room in the inn, he had made up his mind to revenge on the servant the hate he felt for the master. In striking at me he was striking at Churchill. The one he dare not attack ; the other, with three men of like nature to assist him, he felt he could insult with impunity. No doubt, without letting us have an inkling of what was going on, Destrier had arranged with his companions a plan of campaign.

Mistress Lisle knew nothing of the ruffian, whose

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back was turned to us both, or she might possibly have suspected something earlier. Now, however, she saw a signal pass between the four men, and her quick instinct warned her that something was afoot.

"Mind," she whispered to me, with sharp intonation, across the table; "be on your guard."

She informed me later, she had gathered that I was about to be attacked from the man whose face she could see *vis-à-vis* to Captain Destrier. The latter's chair was exactly behind mine. He suddenly stood up, and pushing it back violently, his seat and mine collided. I reached out for my sword, but the man next to Destrier spun the chair away, on which the sword rested, with his foot, sending my weapon flying half across the apartment. I sprang to my feet, but the weight of two men was flung on me, forcing me backwards.

In that instant I heard two sounds which came to my brain in confused fashion, but remembered distinctly enough later on. One was the angry cry of the officer in the corner, who leaped up and rushed to my assistance, astonished and indignant, both at the unprovoked attack and at the odds in numbers of the other side. The other sound was that of a shrill whistle; from whence it came I could not tell.

I was swiftly borne backwards by the weight of Destrier and another man equally heavy, my head struck against the edge of the mantelshelf, and I felt myself falling to the ground.

The next moment I had passed to unconsciousness.

## CHAPTER XIX

THE FIFTH OF NOVEMBER, 1688

I LOOKED up to see a kindly face bending over me. It was that of an old man, with silvery hair and beard to match. His wig was pushed back so as to show his white locks. He had a benevolent expression, coupled with not a little intelligence, in his large blue eyes.

I had never seen him before.

"Where am I?" I inquired. For the moment I had not the faintest recollection what had happened. The past was blurred. It seemed as if I had had some bad dream and was struggling to awake.

"You are in one of the guest-chambers of the Lamb Hotel in Salisbury town."

"How did I get here?" I asked.

"I believe that you were brought here in a litter. At any rate," he added slyly, "you were well escorted, and very urgently commended to my care."

"By whom?" I inquired.

"Chiefly by a young lady of very remarkable beauty. Even an old man like myself could appreciate that fact. A young man might be forgiven falling in love with her, head over heels."

The physician, for such he undoubtedly was,

pulled out a horn snuff-box, and regaled himself with two or three pinches. I raised my hand to my head, and was surprised to find a wet bandage upon it. I glanced up into his eyes, saying :

"What is this ? "

"Vinegar and water," he answered. "It ou<sup>t</sup>ht to have been the napkin to bind up your head for its final resting-place."

"You mean I ought to be dead ? "

"Yes," he replied, "to put it bluntly. You have to congratulate yourself, young sir, on an endowment with which Providence equipped you, perhaps for this very emergency."

"What is that ? " I inquired.

"A skull in which the brains were so carefully covered up out of sight that they were hard to come by. They ought to have been scattered about the spot where you fell, but the thickness of your cranium saved you. A little blood-letting—about a pint, I should say," he added with a grin, "has done the rest. You will be all right again in a couple of days."

I drew a wry face at his summary of the situation, although I was pleased to find that he took a cheerful view of the future.

"I must have a strong constitution, Master Chirurgeon, to stand both their attacks and your remedy."

I had now remembered something of what had happened before I lapsed into unconsciousness.

"It is a good sign, my noble Captain, when a patient begins to be sarcastic. It shows that he is stepping along bravely on the highroad to convalescence."

I was not heeding the old man, but rather following out a line of questioning at the back of my mind.

"Can you tell me what happened? You spoke of a lady just now. You tell me I am in Salisbury. Did she arrive in the city unharmed?"

"I never saw any one look better in my life, or happier, when she heard my verdict on the probabilities of your recovery."

The doctor was on the wrong tack. I did not trouble to set him right, not being concerned as to what his views, natural enough on his part, were. In this, as it happened, I was unwise, laying up for myself, all unwittingly, a store of trouble.

As I did not speak he went on:

"I am afraid that I cannot answer what brought you to this place exactly, but one of your servants is below, who seems very faithful in his attachment, and only gave place to me just now in his attendance when I entered the room."

"Duncan Macalister?" I suggested. "He has known and served me ever since I was born."

"I believe Macalister is his name. I will call him as soon as I have finished my examination and concluded my visit."

I waited with w<sup>l</sup> patience I could during the next quarter of an hour, while the physician, who was not hasty in his movements, satisfied himself on all points as to my physical condition.

I was greatly relieved when he announced his departure. He prescribed gruel as my diet for the rest of the day, and cautioned me not to get up until the morrow, when he would see me again.

In a few minutes Duncan Macalister entered the room. He was genuinely pleased to find me in my right mind once more. The good fellow actually took my hand and kissed it.

"Well, Macalister," I said, "you are glad to find your master on the highroad to recovery?"

"I am that, Captain."

"I hear that you all arrived safe and sound in Salisbury. Is that so?"

"Yes, sir; we brought you along in a litter from Dinton. There was no room in the inn there fit for your honour to lie in. Besides, Mistress Lisle said she thought you ought to have the best of advice and medicine. You lay like a log, Captain, when Donald and I picked you up. I almost thought it was all over with you." Duncan brushed away a tear with the back of his hand at the recollection. "The gentleman who had been fighting recommended the physician who has just left."

"What gentleman do you mean?" I asked, bewildered; my brain was not yet clear by any means. "You are not referring to Captain Destrier, of course?"

"No, sir; to the officer who came and stood over you when you fell. I believe I heard his name was Allayne—Colonel Allayne."

As Macalister spoke I recalled the room at the inn, the unknown who sat by himself at the window, and the sudden unprovoked attack upon me by Destrier and his boon companions. I remembered, too, that Mistress Lisle had mentioned the name of Lord Cranworth's son. She was right, then, in her conjecture.

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"Tell me exactly what happened, Duncan."

"I did not see the beginning of it, sir, only the end—curse my luck! It seems that Mistress Lisle blew her whistle. Abe Salker never got far out of hearing of it wherever she might be; that fellow, sir, is more like a dog than a man. I never saw his like."

"Except yourself, Duncan." I held out my hand to him. "You have served me faithfully ever since I can remember."

"You are very good to say so, Captain," Macalister replied, "but Abe beats me; he has taught me a lesson."

"You see, Duncan, I am not a woman, and can occasionally look after myself; not always, it seems."

I lifted my hand to my head and readjusted the bandage.

"Not when there are four to one against you, sir, and you taken unawares." Macalister swore. "I beg your pardon, saving your presence; it's enough to make a saint swear to think of their knocking away your sword, and coming upon you like that. They didn't know what a mare's-nest they were tumbling into." Duncan laughed.

"Tell me all!" I cried impatiently.

"Abe had his cudgel slung round his waist. He has taken a mighty fancy to that little stick since he first got it from the ostler at Stourton."

"Little stick do you call it? A weaver's beam, more likely."

Macalister laughed. "It seems like a small walking-stick when Salker is waving it over his head. At any rate, he rushed into the room and found

the strange officer standing over your body, keeping three of them at bay, while Mistress Lisle was driving a fourth into a corner with that slim dagger thing it seems she always carries about with her. The man could not well strike her with his sword, and he ran a good chance of being spitted on her weapon. Abe went for them like a fury. He had two of them on the ground in a moment, and the other two he chased round the room, and I believe he would have killed them if it hadn't been for my Lord Cornbury."

"What had the Viscount to do with it?"

He was a great friend of Lord Churchill, and I too, knew him well. There was no more dashing cavalry leader in either the French or English army.

"My Lord Cornbury was dining in the next room with a party of officers. When they heard the clatter, they rushed in to know the cause. The Viscount intervened, and stopped Abe from murdering them right out. He is a real gentleman, Captain Lesterne."

"What happened to Destrier?" I inquired.

"My Lord Cornbury talked to him in style. I thought he would have laid his cane about his shoulders, but he had already been marked pretty well by Abe's cudgel. The Viscount declared that he would have him drummed out of the army. Donald and I were just in time to hear what my lord had to say. Mistress Lisle knew the Viscount very well. She thanked both him and Colonel Allayne, whom my lord introduced to her, very sweetly. I believe they all three had some con-

versation afterwards. Destrier and his fellows were pelted right out of the yard as they rode away. Some labourers had come up; when they heard what had happened, they joined us in giving them a few stones that lay about handy." Macalister laughed again at the recollection. "They left a good deal quicker than they came, I can tell you, master."

I felt by this time that I had heard as much as I could take in. I sent Macalister down for a posset, and when I had partaken of it, turned over and went to sleep.

On the following day the doctor found me sufficiently improved to admit of my sitting up in my room, and by the day after I was able to go downstairs. Beyond a little weakness there was not now much the matter with me. By the fourth day I felt myself strong enough to go and call on Mistress Lisle, so I sent Donald Duvain round to the mill, to know when it would be her pleasure that I should pay my visit.

In response to my question, Mistress Lisle sent me word that she would be pleased to receive me at four o'clock of the afternoon.

At that hour I sallied forth. I took both my servants with me, as I intended to do during my stay in Salisbury. The town was full of military, many soldiers having reached there even since my arrival. Brawls, such as the one in which I had played but a sorry part, were frequent in the taverns of the city. The roads were by no means safe, for foot-pads and other gentlemen of uncertain morals and honesty abounded. I did not think it advisable, therefore, to go unattended, as I had not yet

fully recovered from the blow I had received and the blood I had lost. I noticed crowds of people standing at the street-corners all along the route to the mill. Many of them were citizens, of some respectability judging by their dress. Discussions were evidently going on, if those could be called discussions which were clearly all on one side. It seemed to me that there was something stirring of which I had not been apprised. I determined to ask the question, so, selecting a man in a preacher's dress whom I judged to be a clergyman, I went up to him and made an inquiry.

"The good people of Salisbury seem to be not a little disturbed, if I may judge by the groups of people at the street corners. Can you, pray, inform me, sir, if I am right in my conjecture, and if so, what is the cause?"

The man was of middle age, between forty and fifty, with shrewd dark eyes, which he now turned upon me in evident surprise.

"Are you a stranger in this city, sir?"

"Yes, although I have been in it on many occasions before. I arrived on this visit about four days ago, and owing to an illness have been but little outside my inn."

"That accounts for it," the stranger remarked, more to himself than to me. "You are aware what day it is, sir?"

It was now my turn to look and express surprise.

"I do not understand you." I spoke somewhat haughtily, for it seemed that the clerical gentleman was inclined to some ponderous gibe at my expense.

"My question had a meaning. This is the fifth of November."

"I had forgotten the circumstance. Pray, what has that fact to do with these crowds in the streets and their annoyance?"

"The King—James the Second," he added with a curious emphasis, "has forbidden bonfires, and all other means of celebrating the day, throughout his realm."

"Ah! then the people do not approve of this ordinance?"

"No, sir, they do not; they object to it very strongly. It may prove the spark that sets the rick a-burning." He turned sharply away at this word, and I went on. His last sentence was ringing in my ears, as I turned down the main street into the narrow ill-paved road, which led to the mill where Fortress Lisle was lodging, and so to the river.

Dusk as closing in as I approached the mill, which stood up big and gloomy-looking against the sky-line. Beyond I could detect the river, with an occasional gleam of light on the water, from the departing glow of the sky. I could hear at the back of the mill the whirring of the wheel, which was worked by a small stream just before the latter joined the Avon. By my instructions Duncan Macalister mounted the three steps, leading up to the stout oak door, and knocked vigorously. There was something about the mill and its approaches which suggested that it might stand a siege, if necessary. Abe Salker, for instance, would hold it against a company, armed with his bludgeon.

It was he who appeared in answer to the demand

of the knocker, just as I had pictured him. Seeing who it was at the bottom of the steps, he saluted me with as much graciousness as he was capable of bestowing upon any one.

"My mistress will be pleased to see you, Captain Lesterne."

I mounted the steps and entered the stone-flagged hall. Abe opened the door to the right hand, and announced me by name. The apartment was primitively, but effectually, lighted with lamps at different stages round the walls. I was surprised to find that the room contained three persons. I expected one, or at most two.

Mistress Lisle rose from a chair and came forward to greet me. A gentleman who had been occupying a seat near her also rose to his feet. Dame Carder sat in the far corner knitting. She appeared unconscious of our presence. I understood she was playing the part of duenna.

"I am much pleased, indeed, Captain Lesterne, to see you once again restored to your usual health. I hope you are feeling none the worse for the cowardly blow you received."

"Thank you," I replied, appreciating the warmth of her tone even more than the words themselves. "I am nearly all right again. Sometimes my head feels a little dazed, and I am not quite so firm on my legs as I was. Dr. Fabius assures me that in a few days I shall have lost even these ill effects of the blow. He congratulates me on the hardness of my skull." I laughed.

Mistress Lisle turned to the gentleman, who was still standing, awaiting a formal introduction.

"This is my cousin, or I ought to say, perhaps, kinsman, Count Cornelius Zulestein. Cornelius, this is my friend and protector on more than one occasion, Captain Lesterne."

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance, sir." He spoke slowly, and with a distinct accent; evidently his mastery of the English tongue was by no means complete.

I answered him in Dutch, which Lord Churchill and I had taken "he pains to learn when it seemed advisable, some tir. previously. The rest of the conversation was carried on in that language. While I was talking on different subjects with the Count, who was a near connection of William's representative in London, bearing the same name, I was puzzling out to myself the look on Mistress Lisle's face when she introduced her relative. I was not quite sure whether it was pride or affection, but assuredly it was something I had not seen expressed there before.

The Count was a man of graceful bearing, and with a face which attracted by its frankness and look of high character. He was about thirty years of age. I was at once taken with him. The impression only deepened as we talked. I wondered that Mistress Lisle had not spoken of him before. He was certainly a very close friend. Her reticence puzzled me, as we had had so many opportunities of conversation, and she had mentioned her uncle in London freely enough. My brain, at this period of convalescence, was not equal to mastering any problems of a complex nature. The Count had told me that he had only just arrived from Holland, and had come straight on to Salisbury by his relative's direction.

After we had been talking about half an hour, one of the daughters of the miller came in to announce a meal. Mistress Lisle pressed me to join them. Although I had partaken of a light dinner before leaving the Lamb, I consented, but not without protest. "Surely," I said, "you must have many things to talk over with the Count which my presence will prevent."

Zulestein had told me he would have to leave again early on the following morning.

"Oh no," she replied; "I think we have really said and heard all there is to say and hear. It did not take many minutes." She looked at the Count with a glance of intelligence which again I failed to interpret. "We shall also have plenty of time later, if we need it."

I gave Mistress Lisle my arm, and together we led the way to the parlour on the further side of the hall, where a meal was served in better fashion, and better cooked, than I should have thought possible in the circumstances. The miller's daughter, who had announced dinner, waited.

In the middle of the meal it occurred to me to ask the Count:

"Did you happen to see my Lord Churchill when in London?"

"Yes; I met him at my kinsman's house on the night I arrived from Amsterdam."

I glanced at Mistress Lisle. She understood the suggestion of my eyes that it was her turn to follow up the conversation.

"Captain Lesterne wants to know whether my Lord Churchill satisfied himself as to the truth of the in-

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formation I brought to his lordship at Ash House." She turned to me. "Is not that so?"

I bowed.

"Lord Churchill has been lying incognito at an inn in Cleapside. His presence in London is unknown, except to two or three, my relative among them, in whom he can confide. He has satisfied himself that King James signed a warrant for his committal to the Tower. That warrant has not been put into execution, for reasons which seem good to his Majesty."

"And they are?"

"Expediency. James is waiting. If he feels himself strong enough, the Tower will have a good many guests who will find it difficult to depart, unless it be to the hill hard by. From what I gleaned, you will probably hear from my lord himself, Captain Lesterne, before many hours are over. He wishes you, I know, to have a special regard for the safety of Mistress Lisle, here."

The young man spoke with a certain wistfulness in his tone. It occurred to me that he would have preferred to carry out himself the task laid on my shoulders.

"My safety is not the first consideration," Mistress Lisle put in emphatically, while a flush mounted to her pale face. "The first consideration is the carrying out of the matters I have in hand."

Zulestein drummed on the table impatiently. He shot a glance at her from under his eyelashes. "Others can do that now, surely. Why proceed any further yourself?"

Mistress Lisle answered, with more emotion than the occasion seemed to demand: "My work is my

own. It will be carried out until I can myself inform the King, who did to death the best woman that ever lived, that the task I set myself is accomplished."

At this moment Abe Salker rushed into the room.

"There is a big fire out Dorset way," he cried. "Best come and see it. It looks like ricks a-burning."

"Ha!" Mistress Lisle cried, and she clapped her hands together.

I could not understand her delight. It resembled that of a child with a new toy. It seemed to me inconsiderate, too. A fire might spell ruin to some poor Dorset yeoman.

Mistress Lisle had jumped up. She ran out of the room. We followed. Already she was halfway up the third flight of stairs. We mounted after her. I should have taken it leisurely, but the Count appeared as excited as his relative. I caught the infection without knowing why. Abe brought up the rear. We all went up to the top floor and then entered a loft. It had a space left open at one end without glass or any other incumbrance.

Mistress Lisle had rushed to this aperture, and, bending forward, was looking eagerly out into the night, now of an inky blackness, suggesting coming rain. The Count ran to her side, and I speedily joined them. Some miles away, no doubt on a height, how far off I could not tell, flames were darting up into the sky. No ricks would burn like this; only tar-barrels could cause so great a conflagration.

Mistress Lisle turned to me. I could not see her face, although Abe had come into the loft bearing a lanthorn. Its rays only showed the outline of her

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form. I could hear the pulsation of her breath. Her voice thrilled as she spoke.

"Thank God! Captain Lesterne. The tyrant's throne is tottering on its base. The King that is to be has come!"

I could not affect to misunderstand her, although I was utterly surprised. Mistress Lisle and the Count had been expecting the intimation.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied, "quite sure. That tells me." As she spoke she turned and pointed towards the beacon fire.

## CHAPTER XX

### LADY LETTICE PASSES ME BY

WE all stood and watched the bonfire blazing for the best part of an hour. Now it shot up into the sky, now it seemed to die down, flicker away, and even, occasionally, created the impression of having gone out altogether. It struck more than one of that small company that all this might be an allegory of what would actually happen in England, during the next few weeks or months.

When the flames got the mastery, Mistress Lisle would clap her hands ; when the horizon was black, I could hear her laboured breathing, amounting almost to a sob. Once I fancied the Count had taken her hand into his. I made excuse, almost immediately afterwards, saying that I felt weary and would return to my inn.

Mistress Lisle did not attempt to combat my resolution ; perhaps she felt that I was not altogether in sympathy with herself and the Count at this moment. This was no doubt true ; my companions had no hesitation as to their object and sympathy. Mistress Lisle had her personal wrongs biting at her heart to be avenged. The Count was a Dutchman, proud of his silent, determined, capable Prince. I,

on the contrary, was an Englishman. The coming fight was to take place on English ground, English blood would flow to stain the soil. Sedgemoor was too recent for the sound of its drums not to be echoing and re-echoing in my heart. At times, I was ready to look upon William as a foreign and hostile invader; at others, I thought of James, the servant and the tool of Italian priests, the puppet of the French King, grinding the liberties of England beneath his heel, having respect neither to Church, University, the sanctity of oaths, nor the constitution of the realm. William was the husband of an English Princess. He had been invited to come over by some of the noblest names in the country. For years he had been the brave defender against odds of the Protestant Faith in Europe. These considerations were uppermost in my mind; but the other side was not sufficiently in the background to render me wholly in sympathy with Mistress Lisle and Count Cornelius Zulestein.

So I left them.

In the main passage of the mill I found the servants discussing the news with eager interest. They, at any rate, had no reserve. Abe, of course, went heart and soul with his mistress. Macalister and Donald Duvain were Presbyterians. They had little sympathy with the religion which the King furthered with all the vigour of a bigot. William of Orange had the sympathies of the servants without any hesitation.

I passed out into the narrow by-way leading from the mill to the main street. Macalister and Duvain had provided themselves with torches. I stumbled

along between them on the rough cobbles. The lane was empty. Not so the street, when we turned into it. The whole population of the town seemed to be out of doors. The knots of people gathered at the corners, which we passed on our way, had swelled into hundreds. Men were galloping in from the country. Soldiers on horseback and on foot clattered their spurs and accoutrements in the roads and on the pavement. Every one was talking of the one event. Every one was asking questions which no one was competent to answer. Where had William landed? What force had he brought with him? Who had joined him? Who were on the King's side; who on the Prince's? Speculations were plentiful, information conspicuous by its absence. I heard my master's name frequently, as my body-servants shouldered their way through the crowd and made a passage for me.

I could tell, even by the casual remarks which fell upon my ears, it was the general comment that Churchill held the key of the situation. He was, admittedly, the greatest General of the age, the darling of the soldiery. It was known that he had never swerved in his allegiance to the Protestant Faith. While others had been influenced by his Majesty to subvert their real convictions, the General had stood firm. If William could count upon him, his way was made comparatively easy. If James, on the other hand, could secure the loyalty of his great subject, Sedgemoor might be repeated with its results, on a larger and more terrible scale.

I thought of the Earl of Cawston. If he had left England most probably he had joined the

Prince. In that case the bonfire I had just been watching, which announced the Orange landing, proclaimed his appearance with it.

My thoughts during the last few days, when I was tied to my couch by the physician's commands and my own weakness, had gone continually to the Lady Lettice Latour and her father. It is during moments like these, when action is impossible, and thought the only field of activity, that one realises one's position. Since I parted with the coach, which was taking the Earl and his daughter away, I had had no time or opportunity to weigh my feelings with regard to them until a felon attack laid me low. Then, lying on my bed, and afterwards resting on a settee, at the Lamb, I measured, more clearly than I had ever done before, what had come to me during those months when I had been a constant visitor at Cawston Castle. I had conceived a real friendship for the Earl, with his stately courtesy and high-bred dignity. But it must be confessed it was of Lady Lettice that I thought the most. I had seen her in every mood—grave and gay. I pictured her now riding with her falcon at her wrist, fishing by my side in the river, fencing in the armoury at the Castle, playing the hostess with charm, and yet dignity, at the end of her father's board. I had not measured at the time the web that was being woven about my heart, or tested the strength of the strands, so fine, like spun-silk, which were being bound about my very being.

I understood now that all the while I had been to school; for the first time in my life I was learning to love.

Now my strength was renewed, flowing as rapidly as before it had ebbed, I longed to make my way to Stonefield Hall. I desired to tell Lady Lettice all that was in my mind. I hoped by many intonations which at last I gathered up and treasured, although before they expressed little to me, that she was not altogether insensible to my regard, and perhaps was prepared to give me something in return.

When a lover has arrived at this stage, impatience amounts to a fever in the veins; I could hardly hold myself during the last twenty-four hours, but knew that I was not strong enough to accomplish even that short journey and back, without such fatigue as would retard my ultimate recovery.

I felt, however, that on the morrow I might be well enough to mount Diomed once more, without experiencing that dizziness which would render horse exercise anything but a safe pursuit.

With these thoughts and intentions in my brain I paid but little heed to the crowds which retarded our progress. Then, in a moment, I woke up from my dream. Some gaily dressed riders were approaching in the opposite direction from the one I and my body-servants were pursuing. They were riding at a slow pace, necessitated by the congested condition of the road. I started. Amongst the dozen who were advancing I recognised two. One was the strange officer who had dined by himself in the inn at Dinton on the night I was attacked, and whom Mistress Lisle had rightly identified as Colonel Fitzroy Allayne, Lord Cranworth's son. The other was the Lady Lettice

Latour. She was talking to Colonel Allayne, riding at her bridle-hand. My heart, I could not have told why, gave a start, and then pulsed furiously as I looked at them. They seemed perfectly satisfied with each other, well content in each other's society, needing nothing more. Impulse, rather than reason, made me step off the side path into the road. There were two horsemen between me and the Colonel; the nearer would have knocked me over, unintentionally, of course, owing to my sudden movement, if it had not been that Donald Duvain grasped me by the arm and pulled me out of the way. The gentleman whose horse nearly struck me uttered a little shout of warning, which attracted the attention of the rest of his company.

Both Colonel Allayne and Lady Lettice turned and looked at me. The former recognised me at once. He had, indeed, assisted in picking me up when I lay insensible near the mantelpiece of the inn at Dinton. I saw him draw rein, as if he would pull up and speak to me. It was only natural that he should do so, to inquire after my condition. But simultaneously with this intention on his part the Lady Lettice said something to the Colonel. He then merely raised his plumed hat to me and rode on. The Lady Lettice bowed distantly, and she likewise rode by with only this formal salutation.

I felt myself turn dizzy; it seemed as if the world was going round, that men and horses were dancing a wild jig in which the very houses were taking a part. My body-servants, noting my condition, thought, not unnaturally, that I was suffering from a recurrence of the illness from which I had barely recovered.

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They each gave me an arm, and with this assistance I managed to make my way back to the Lamb.

Dr. Fabius was summoned. He prescribed bleeding once more, and I was not in a state to resist the prescription; consequently I was put back to bed almost as weak as I had been when first brought in on the litter to the inn.

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## CHAPTER XXI

### COMMUNICATIONS

THROUGHOUT the following day I lay like a log. I was not insensible, but I seemed incapable of consecutive thought. My brain was numbed. Fabius came and went; fortunately he did not put me back on the gruel diet he had prescribed before; hence, although my mind was dulled and lethargic, my body received strength from the nutriment I took in, without knowing what I ate and drank.

During the whole day I slept not at all, but as night drew on my eyelids drooped, and a deep slumber seized upon my whole frame.

I must have lain without moving for thirteen or fourteen hours. When I woke up it was broad daylight. The cloud had lifted from my brain; I felt myself more the man than I had done any time since the attack was made upon me. Macalister, who had been very anxious about my condition, was delighted to find me determined in mind, and not even lacking in vigour of body.

As I dressed—with considerable care, for I had determined to go to Stonefield Hall and find out what was the cause of the Lady Lettice's strange

behaviour—my mind shaped itself clearly as to the future. I had only now come face-to-face with my real feeling towards Lord Cawston's daughter. I knew that I loved her with all my heart, and nothing would ever satisfy me unless I made her my wife. The coldness with which she had treated me in Salisbury street only served to whet my ardour and strengthen my determination. My jealousy, too, was roused. I felt sure that Colonel Allayne admired Lady Lettice. All the opportunities I had had in the past, and more, he enjoyed in the present. Lady Lettice was lying at his father's house, and although the Colonel was quartered with his regiment, he no doubt spent much of his time at Stonefield Hall, only a few miles away from his headquarters.

I was so absorbed in this personal feeling, that I was practically impervious to the fact that great happenings must be going on in the political and military world outside. My attention was recalled to these matters when I entered the great parlour of the Lamb, to obtain some breakfast. The tables were nearly all full—in fact, so much so, that I could only see one vacant place, and that was made by some one who rose as I entered. Besides those at the tables, groups of men stood at the window and about the fireplace. As far as I could see there was not a single woman in the room. I judged it wiser to secure the vacant place before any one else had the opportunity of stepping into it. As I advanced, I met the gentleman who was leaving the breakfast-table point blank. I recognised him at once. He was the ecclesiastic who had spoken to

me when I went to find Mistress Lisle at the mill. It was he who had explained what occasioned the excitement in the streets of the town, owing to the prohibition of all bonfires on the fifth of November. As he looked into my eyes I saw that he recognised me likewise. The words which he had uttered had not recurred to me again, but they flashed across my brain at the moment of recognition :

*"It may prove the spark that sets the rick a-burning."*

Instantaneous is the action of the brain. I pictured the lost at the inn, Mistress Dorothy Lisle, Count Cornelius Zulestein, and myself looking out into the darkness of the night, and seeing in the centre of it, far out towards the English Channel, the blazing beacon, with its flame mounting now towards the sky, now sinking down as if it were dying away, then bursting forth in fresh vigour. I wondered whether this cleric knew more when he spoke to me at the corner of the street than I had imagined, or whether his words had but a chance fitness to what so soon followed upon them.

He surveyed me with a little gleam of humour which seemed to say, "I know what you are thinking." I would have passed him with a bare "Good morning," but his broad, sinewy frame blocked the way, and I could hardly do so without rudeness. There was no one quite close to us. He spoke in a low clear voice.

"The flame was soon kindled, was it not? We shall see the end of the conflagration ere long."

His deep tones, and something distinguished

about his appearance, arrested me. I felt no longer a wish to pass him. I noticed, also for the first time, that his dress suggested some high ecclesiastical dignitary, in spite of the fact that it was not wholly clerical, for his lower limbs were clad for riding, and he carried a riding-whip in his hand.

"I know nothing of what has happened since we met, reverend sir, except that I saw the bonfire, or beacon, which was lighted somewhere on the Dorset uplands. I have been suffering from illness, and was in bed throughout yesterday."

"This is the seventh of November," he said ; "on the fifth, as your beacon fire announced, William the Silent landed at Tor Bay. He brought with him thirteen thousand seasoned troops, a large proportion of them Englishmen, who have come to fight for the liberties of the realm and the Protestant Faith. The rest are soldiers who have fought under their commander in many a battle on the Continent of Europe."

I had forgotten all about breakfast ; the clergyman's eager tone carried conviction. I felt myself an atom whirling round in the great maelstrom of politics.

"Thirteen thousand men will not conquer England," I remarked, more to hear what he would say than by way of objection.

"No, not against the will of England, but with it. James could not conquer England with thirteen thousand men, but William of Orange, William the Silent, William the Prudent—will."

"You speak with enthusiasm," I remarked.

"Because I know them both, well—James and William."

"Who are you?" I asked involuntarily.

A smile flickered about his strong, firm mouth. Nevertheless he did not answer in so many words.

"William reaches Exeter to-day; the gates will be opened to him by the citizens."

"They were ready to do the same for Monmouth."

"Ah! Monmouth! Poor misguided profligate! weak-kneed, weak-brained, I knew him too, well! This is a man, who rides into Exeter to-day; one of the great ones of all time; one of those who shape history."

I could not understand why he should be addressing all these remarks to me. As I looked round the room, I noticed that all eyes were directed upon us. I certainly was insignificant enough; it must, then, be my companion who was attracting the interest of that mixed assemblage. I felt bound to question him.

"Why do you tell me all this?" I asked. "I am a person of no consequence—a mere pawn on this great chess-board, on which there are castles and knights in plenty."

"You have left out the Bishops," he remarked, and this time he nearly laughed outright. "Don't you think that the Bishops count? Was England ever so moved as when his Grace of Canterbury and six other prelates of the Church were illegally sent to the Tower by His Most Christian Majesty"—he spoke with irony—"and released subsequently, because there is still justice in England, when Jeffreys is not administering it?"

Well! I must go, young man; I have far to ride to-day. Before nightfall I must be nearer Exeter than this good city of Salisbury. I partly warned you the other day what was about to happen; now I will tell you, being somewhat of a prophet, other things that are impending. The Earl of Danby, my old friend Thomas Osborne, will hold the Ridings for William. Lord Lovelace has Oxford in the hollow of his hand. The Duke of Norfolk will answer for the county which gives him his title." He had been speaking in a low voice; now he dropped it still lower. "Lord Churchill will be in Salisbury city ere long on his way to the West. In the meantime, Master Equerry, take care of Mistress Lisle; she is a chosen vessel in this work of saving England from Italian priest and the power of French gold." With a nod, and "God be with you," the stranger passed me by and left the room, men doffing their caps to him as he departed.

I was dumbfounded at the knowledge he had displayed, not merely about what was going on throughout the length and breadth of England, but his acquaintance with my name and position, and with the relationships of my present situation.

The place at the table still awaited me. I now moved into it, and was amused to find that some of the deference, which had been accorded to my late companion, was transferred to me. A stout man, by his dress and appearance a country squire, paused in the act of conveying a large piece of pasty to his mouth to give me a low bow.

"Your friend," he remarked, "is a strong man. If

you don't always agree with him, you can't help respecting him."

"Yes," I replied. I did not intend to own that his personality was unknown to me. The stout man spoke again, not satisfied, perhaps, with my monosyllabic reply.

"William," he remarked, "has got a firm friend in Bishop Burnet, and, if ever the crown of England is set on his head, no one will have had more to do with it than his lordship of Salisbury."

So I found out what I wanted to know without asking. How Bishop Burnet knew me I could not tell; but of all men he had the reputation of being best informed on matters which interested him and affected his schemes. Francis Lesterne, himself, was nobody, but Captain Lesterne, equerry and confidential servant to my Lord Churchill, and protector for the nonce of Mistress Dorothy Lisle, was quite another person.

Half an hour later, I rose from the table, intending within the hour to ride over to Stonefield Hall. As I left the big parlour I was met by Duncan Macalister.

"There is a messenger come for you, Captain; he has brought a note which he is instructed to deliver into your own hands." I looked towards the entrance of the Lamb, and saw a man booted and spurred, who bowed low when my glance fell upon him.

There were too many loitering about the passage for me to receive a communication in such a public place; I therefore bade Macalister bring the messenger to my bedroom, to which I at once ascended.

As I anticipated, the note the man handed to me, after he had shut and locked the bedroom door behind him, was from my Lord Churchill. I knew the straggling handwriting and the ill spelling, but there was no signature attached to the document, neither did my name appear from first to last. It ran as follows:

"The gentleman who writes this line will be moving shortly towards the West. He wishes, therefore, that no one should come to seek him elsewhere. The recipient of this note is requested to place himself entirely at the disposal of her in whose company he arrived, and to further her wishes in every possible way; by doing so he will please, as heretofore, the inscriber of this letter."

The man who brought this note was a stranger to me, and I did not know how far he might be acquainted with the writer, or with the purport of the message he brought.

"I trust that the gentleman who inscribed this note is well?"

"Yes, sir."

"There was no verbal message as well?"

"No, sir; I was instructed that all that was requisite was set down there."

I handed the man a guinea, and he immediately left the room. I then sat down to ponder over the note. Bishop Burnet had gone towards Exeter. He had already apprised me of Churchill's intention to come to Salisbury, so that the intelligence I had just received was in Burnet's possession prior to reaching me. At any rate, one thing was clear: I was to place myself entirely at the disposal of Mistress Lisle.

Churchill, when he said a thing, meant it to be carried out to the letter. He was a martinet in the matter of obedience. Before pursuing my own interests at Stonefield Hall, with a view to ascertain the cause of Lady Lettice's strange behaviour, I was in duty bound first to find out whether Mistress Lisle required my services. If she relied upon me in any way, my illness, since I arrived in Salisbury, must have retarded her business not a little.

I buckled on my sword, preparatory to paying a visit to the mill, when there came a knock at my bedroom door. In obedience to my invitation it opened, and Duncan Macalister announced "Count Cornelius Zulestein."

I shook hands with my visitor, feeling and showing not a little surprise.

"I thought, Count, you were to have started for London yesterday?"

"So I should have done, Captain Lesterne, had I not heard of your illness."

I failed to understand his solicitude. Zulestein, although courteous, had not appeared specially drawn towards me; in fact, I had thought him a little cold and restrained beneath his gentlemanlike behaviour. He saw the wonder written in my eyes; probably he had expected it. He spoke with some hesitation, as if he found it a little difficult to express his thoughts.

"The city and district are so full of desperadoes, and crimes of all kinds are of such frequent occurrence, now that roving bands of soldiers are let loose in all directions, that I did not care to leave Mistress Lisle solely under the protection of servants, however faithful."

"Then it was for the sake of Mistress Lisle you remained, Count?" I asked.

"Certainly," he replied. "I have broken an important engagement to remain in Salisbury until now, but if you are convalescent and able to give up your time to act as her escort, I can leave with less anxiety."

It struck me as a curious coincidence: the note I had just read and the Count's words met at the same point. My fate was certainly for the present to be bound up with that of Mistress Lisle.

"You may rely upon me, Count Zulestein, to do my best for the protection of the lady in whom you are interested."

"Interested!" He paced the room, and I saw his face working with deep emotion. "Great Heavens above! I am 'interested.'" He turned to me, and I could see his fingers working. "I love her with all my heart. I have loved her for years; she is my soul, my life, my very existence; and she is in peril every day in carrying out this mad scheme of revenge."

My heart went out to him. I stretched out my hand, and taking his into mine, pressed it warmly.

"You have my sympathy!" I cried.

"I thank you. Shall I own, at one time I felt ——"

"I understand. There is no occasion. Mistress Lisle and I have been comrades, owing to the circumstances which brought us together, and the trust imposed upon me by my master, Lord Churchill."

"I cannot imagine how any one can be with Mistress Lisle and not fall in love with her," he remarked simply.

"Unless his heart is given elsewhere," I suggested,

"Ah! then you love, too," the Count exclaimed.

It was my turn now to feel the emotion that he had betrayed a short time before. I turned to the window and looked out; it commanded a view of a crowded street far below, but I was not looking at the people, excepting so far that they reminded me of another scene, when the city was ablaze with torches, and some one rode by me in the glare of their light with the bare recognition of a distant acquaintance.

After a pause I turned back to him. "I, too, love," I said, "with all my heart. She whom I love passed me by on the night I left you with a look which made my heart cold."

"Have you ever told your love?" he asked.

"No, because I hardly knew it myself."

"So she has never been asked, and consequently has never answered?"

"No," I replied; "perhaps she has never cared a jot for me; yet once we were friends. Now, without vestige of cause on my part, she looks at me askance, and treats me as if I had never been anything to her."

"Then I am better off than you, for my cousin has avowed her love, and we may hope that happier days will come when her present task is accomplished."

"God grant us both, Count, the happiness we seek!"

"Amen," he replied, and with that word departed.

I thought about what the Count had said after he left. It presented Mistress Lisle in such a new aspect. I had seen her hitherto from only one side, that of her mission. The Count, on the contrary, viewed her from an altogether different standpoint, that of a beautiful and, at the same time, very lovable woman. Probably he had seen her in this light before

ever the tragedy came into her life, which had proved such a dominating influence.

I had sufficient liking and regard for the girl to be glad that there was another side to which she might revert later—a tender woman's side, more in keeping with the physical endowments God had bestowed upon her. Zulestein was a fine fellow, a gentleman by instinct as well as birth, well worthy of a woman's love. I had seen more clearly into his soul during those few moments in my room than I had done before, when he was in company with Mistress Lisle and set, no doubt, a guard over himself.

I liked to feel that the work entrusted to me was to be done not merely because my master commanded it, but because a loyal and true-hearted gentleman had asked my protection for the woman he loved. I made up my mind that nothing should be wanting on my part to hand her c - to him safe and sound.

When Count Zulestein was announced I had thrust Lord Churchill's unsigned scrawl into the pocket of my tunic. Now that he had gone I took it out from its hiding-place with the intention of re-perusing and then burning it. After looking it through once more and finding in it nothing further than was engraved on my memory, I took it over to the fireplace with the intention of dropping it into the embers. Something, however, restrained me; I cannot tell what. There was nothing in the note which, if it were lost or fell into other hands, could convey information harmful to any one of the three concerned by it, namely, Churchill, Mistress Lisle, and myself. I therefore thrust it back into my pocket, and afterwards did not regret I had done so.

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## CHAPTER XXII

### AN ORDER FROM LONDON

I FELT a very different person as I walked along the street than I had done on my first sallying out a couple of days before. My vitality had reasserted itself. The blood coursed freely through my veins ; my brain had cleared. I noted everything as I passed : the groups of men interchanging news ; the soldiers going and coming on horseback. Every now and then some fresh intelligence would arrive from the outlying districts. Troops were pouring westwards. A sense of impending conflict was in the air. What was the King doing ? Who had joined William ? Was it true that Bristol had declared for the invader ? As I and my servants were detained from time to time in our walk by the throng I could hear much of what was being said. Some were giving news, some were receiving it. Nothing was certain, so that there was ample room for conjecture.

All business seemed at a standstill. The rumour was gaining ground that the Earl of Faversham, Commander-in-Chief of the Royal Army, would make his headquarters at Salisbury. It was also said that

in all probability James would take the field in person. The excitement was naturally intense; it communicated itself to me; whereas on the previous occasion of my walking to the mill I had felt as one outside, only partially concerned.

Our progress was necessarily slow; the great clock of the Cathedral was striking noon when I turned down the side alley leading to the mill. Duncan Macalister and Donald Duvain had walked close behind me from the time that I left the Lamb. They were, in fact, sufficiently near to be able to touch my cloak, if they wished to attract my attention. This actually happened when we came nearly to the mill entrance. The road here was very narrow. Opposite the mill was a high wall, which even at mid-day shut out a great deal of light, with the assistance of the mill itself, towering against the sky, facing it. This wall apparently enclosed some wharves having a frontage on the river. I had not noticed before that there was a doorway in this wall, but on our arrival at the spot Macalister touched my sleeve.

"There is a man standing in the doorway opposite," he said.

I am not sure if I should have noticed him, as there was a recess, and the figure was obscured by shadow. Directly my attention was attracted the man, who was heavily cloaked and with a wide-brimmed felt hat drawn low over his brows, stepped out and walked away in the direction of the river. Of course, he might have merely come through the doorway from the inclosed space beyond the wall. On the other hand, he might have been watching the entrance to the mill. Personally, I thought the latter

more probable, but there was nothing to decide which explanation was the correct one.

"Shall I go and ask the fellow his business, Captain?" Macalister inquired.

I hardly know what my answer would have been, but at this moment my attention was diverted. The heavy oak door of the mill was swung back, and Abe Salker ushered a man on to the steps outside. The latter looked like a lawyer's clerk, or he might have been one of the minor officials of the Cathedral. Both he and Salker seemed surprised when their eyes rested upon us. At first the little man, whom Salker was showing out, appeared inclined to go back, but something the manservant said apparently reassured him, for he took off his hat to me, came down the steps, and with a low bow passed us in the direction of the city. By the time he had gone, the other stranger who had been ensconced, I may almost say concealed, in the recess facing the mill, had disappeared. It was too late now to send Macalister after him, if, indeed, I had decided to do so. There were plenty of hiding-places along the river's bank. Besides, as I said to myself, what right had I to question him?—he had as much business in the road as myself and my servants.

Salker held the door back as we passed in.

"Can I see Mistress Lisle?" I inquired.

"Yes, sir, I think so," Abe replied with some hesitation.

"Perhaps you will kindly go and announce me, and take your mistress's commands on the subject?"

I could not understand the man's hesitation, and felt a little aggrieved at the scanty nature of the

welcome he gave me. All my inclinations had been to go to Stonefield Hall. I had sacrificed them to do my duty, as commanded by my master, to Mistress Lisle. The idea that she might not want me was distinctly aggravating in my present state of mind.

I stood in the hall and waited while Abe went upstairs. In two minutes Mistress Lisle ran down the steps.

She greeted me with a warmth of welcome which entirely took away my previous irritation.

"I am very glad you have come, Captain Lesterne. I have something important to tell you." So saying, she drew me into the room on the right-hand side of the entrance porch; when we were in, she beckoned to me to close the door. "I have just received information," she said; "a number of suspected people are to be arrested in Salisbury, by an order from London. My name heads the list."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied; "I have it from an absolutely trustworthy source." She smiled. "You see, I have a good many powerful friends, who take care to keep me informed of the enemy's movements."

"I met a man going out as I came in."

"Yes, he was the messenger. He is one of the vergers at the Cathedral."

"Bishop Burnet is a good friend of yours, I think?"

Mention of the Cathedral brought the Bishop's name to my lips.

Mistress Lisle nodded. "A very staunch one, and of the cause, too. William has no better friend in England. But how did you know that?"

It was my turn to smile now. "He told me to look after you this very morning. Do you think he knew then that your arrest was decided upon?"

"I think he may have anticipated it, but the actual information, I believe, did not come to Salisbury till after he left the city. I am forewarned, for the warrants have not yet been issued."

Then I remembered the man I had seen lurking in the doorway. I told Mistress Lisle the circumstance. She looked grave.

"That man was a spy upon my movements. They do not intend me to escape this time, if they can help it. Do you know what is the real cause of this persecution?"

"I should have thought there might have been a great many."

"The last straw was the visit to Ash House. That is known at headquarters now, I am told. M. Barillon is a well-informed person. He no doubt also knows the fate of his emissaries, who tried to do covertly what, by process of law, is now to be carried out more openly. A Lisle died for Monmouth. There is another of the same name ready to go to the block, or the stake, for William and for the liberties of England."

She spoke with a lofty courage which seemed to expand her very form, and to give a regal dignity to her beauty. I thought of Zulestein, of his love for her. I wondered whether he would have left that morning had he known what was impending.

"You will do nothing rash, Mistress Lisle? Remember there are those who love you."

She looked at me with a shrewd glance.

"Some one else, besides Bishop Burnet, has been with you this morning, Captain Lesterne?"

I did not reply. I was afraid to speak, lest I should say more than the Count would have wished. I was not quite sure how far he would approve of my informing the girl he loved of all that had passed between us.

After a pause Mistress Lisle went on : "I must do my duty—that is the first consideration ; but you need not fear that of my own will I shall run my head into the lion's mouth."

"What do you propose to do?"

"When you were announced I was putting my things together for a flitting. My work in Salisbury itself is nearly completed. My Lord Faversham is coming very shortly, and possibly James himself. The time for his meeting and mine is not yet ripe. I must, in any case, leave the city before it is transformed into a camp."

"It is nearly that already, with the soldiers coming and going, and quartered here and there for miles round."

"It will be more so yet, and then the end will not be far off."

She spoke almost as one inspired. Her words carried conviction to my ears. I felt that she was a prophetess, with a real Divine afflatus.

"I want you, Captain Lesterne, if you will kindly do so, to accompany me on an expedition this afternoon, and then see me to a place of safety."

"Certainly," I replied. "My master's orders are that I should place myself entirely at your disposal, until he requires my personal service. I need hardly

say that my wishes are quite in accord with these directions."

I saw her face distinctly brighten, as a cloud does when it catches the rays of the sun.

"Did Lord Churchill really tell you to look after me, Captain Lesterne?"

"Yes; I received a note from him to that effect only this very morning."

"I am glad," she cried; "that shows that the General is heart and soul with us." Then she added, more lightly: "What an important woman I am! Plotted against and attacked by some, guarded and cared for by others."

"You have not told me," I suggested, "when we are to start and where we are to go."

"We cannot start until it is dark. Then I will meet you, with Dame Carder and Abel, in the narrow lane at the back of this mill. Very few people know that it has an exit on that side, it is so rarely used. There is a stable close to the entrance, where our horses are. To go out at the front would ensure my being spied upon, and if the warrant is signed by that time I should be arrested before I left the city. From the lane at the back we can get by by-paths to our destination."

"What is that?" I asked.

"Stonefield Hall," she answered. "I am informed that there is a dance to be given there this evening in honour of your friend, the Lady Lettice Latour. Colonel Fitzroy Allayne will be present, and I have to see him on important business." She smiled. "You introduced me, but you were not aware of it at the time, for you lay insensible on the floor of the inn at Dinton."

## CHAPTER XXII

### AT STONEFIELD HALL

JUST before four o'clock in the afternoon I sallied forth from the Lamb to meet Mistress Lisle, as arranged. My two body-servants were fully armed as well as myself. We took a detour, to avoid all the main streets. My eyes were continually on the alert to see if our movements were the object of any attention, but I could detect none. The man standing in the doorway, when I went to the mill, had made me suspicious of even chance passers-by.

It took us half an hour to reach the trysting place. Although I was before my time, Mistress Lisle and her attendant were ready when we arrived. Abe was holding the horses; I assisted the lady into her saddle, while Donald Duvain did the same for Dame Carder. Just as this was arranged a loud knocking struck upon our ears from the front of the mill. All around us was silent, amid gathering gloom. We could just hear the low moaning of the river as it swept down past some rocks, at the end of the lane. There was something alike sinister and ominous in those sounds, muffled though they were, which came from the other side of the mill.

"We must make haste," Mistress Lisle whispered,

"Master Hurst, the miller, has made himself scarce, at my suggestion. The place is empty; they have come to the cage; they will find the bird flown. No doubt the door will be broken open; but the oak is pretty tough; it will take them some time. I understand that soldiers are being employed for the purpose of arresting those persons who are on the black list. The city has practically passed under martial law."

Nothing more was said. Abe Salker had mounted by this time; with his instinct for locality he led the way without any hesitation. We wound in and out, traversing one lane after another. I should have been perfectly bewildered, and in fact even the straight road to Stonefield Hall was unknown to me. Salker was rarely in difficulties: only twice did he have to ask his way. The first time was from an old woman, apparently a gipsy. The second time he was obliged to go into a small inn by the roadside—there were no other houses near, and pedestrians avoided these by-paths. Murder and robbery were, in fact, rife on all sides.

It must have been about six o'clock when we rode through the park gates of Stonesfield Hall. I must confess to a feeling of thankfulness that we had succeeded in reaching it at all. I had been on tenter-hooks from the time that we started. The night was dark, the roads miry and narrow, and over it all a sense of responsibility; it was almost certain that pursuit would follow, and if the direction we had taken was ascertained, the enemy might swoop down upon us at any moment. A fight in the open, where one can see one's adversaries and measure their

strength is one thing; a sudden attack in the dark by superior numbers quite another. I was not afraid of the former, but the latter did not appeal to me. Glad was I when we came within sight of the lights of Stonefield Hall; it was illuminated from one end to the other.

Opposite to the Hall was a wide circular space filled with grass; round it ran the drive. To the right of the mansion was a yard surrounded by stabling. This adjunct was covered with ivy, as was the greater part of the Hall. On this particular evening the stable-yard and surrounding buildings were illuminated with lanthorns. We could see grooms passing backwards and forwards as we rode up, paying attention to the needs of their masters' horses. We did not stop until we reached the steps, some half-dozen in number, before the main doorway.

Mistress Lisle had questioned Salker as to the general surroundings of the Hall. She had ascertained that there was a small door in the side wing which gave access to a glass-house, and through that to the dining-room. It had been decided that our horses should be taken to this entrance. One of the grooms at the Hall was a friend of Master Hurst, the miller with whom Mistress Lisle had been lodging. His name was Lenstone. Hurst had carefully described the Hall, with which he had had dealings many years, to Abel. He had assured him that they could rely upon Lenstone to do what he was bidden, and act faithfully, in an emergency.

Mistress Lisle and I had talked over these details

before we reached the Hall. We had both of us been in too many dangers not to take precautions beforehand. On our arrival Duncan Macalister was sent to summon Lenstone, the latter being Lord Cranworth's head groom. He came immediately and received my instructions. The horses were to be attended to, with a view to the journey Mistress Lisle proposed to take before nightfall. He was afterwards to take them round, to await us at the side door.

Abe Salker would not leave his mistress, so he followed her and myself into the building. It happened that the largest room in the Hall for dancing purposes was right in front of the main doorway. It had once been the dining-room, but was now only used for such purposes when great entertaining was being done at the mansion.

Mistress Lisle and I, having first given our names to the major-domo, were ushered straight in. After the darkness outside the contrast of the brilliantly lighted saloon was dazzling in the extreme. It tried our eyes not a little.

Lady Cranworth came forward to receive us. Mistress Lisle explained the purpose for which she had come. It was evident that the mistress of the Hall was perfectly acquainted with her tory. I myself was unknown, but the fact that I was equerry to Lord Churchill was a sufficient passport. Lady Cranworth introduced me to her husband, and then took Mistress Lisle under her protection to await the conclusion of the dance now in progress.

At the further end from the door by which we had entered, was a gallery filled with musicians

playing various instruments. All the centre of the noble saloon was taken up with dancers. I have rarely looked upon a scene which struck me with more admiration. The dance was a minuet, with all the stately grace which characterises its measures. It took me a little while to focus my gaze ; then my eyes picked out the Lady Lettice Latour. She was dancing with Colonel Fitzroy Allayne. Dressed wholly in white satin, with a golden girdle about her waist and a gold fringe at the bottom of her dress, I had never seen her look so surpassingly beautiful. It was, in fact, a revelation to me. Hitherto, I had always seen her quietly attired in the routine of ordinary life. In the ball-room she was transformed and transfigured. With her dress likewise went her surpassing dignity of motion. The minuet gave it full expression. Although there were twenty pairs of dancers, it seemed that all the lookers on had their attention fixed on this one particular set near the centre. The Colonel, I could not but admit, was a dancer of rare skill. The grace which Lady Lettice displayed was met on his part by a stately courtesy, as they separated, bowed to one another, and re-united. I saw her eyes meet his with a look of enjoyment. She was entering fully into the spirit of the measure she was treading. As for me, my feelings were inexpressible. It seemed as if I were looking into a paradise from which I was excluded. There may have been other aching hearts under brocades or velvet coats in that brilliant assemblage, but surely not one which ached as did mine. I knew now, more than ever, that the love I felt for the Lady Lettice was an overmastering passion, as

I saw her denying me a return, and bestowing it upon a rival.

I hardly know whether Lady Cranworth addressed any remarks to me and whether I answered them in some sort of random fashion. I was impervious to everything except this one idea which scorched my brain. I cursed my own folly, to think that when I might have won her I had not understood the character or the depth of the feeling I had entertained for her, throughout the whole of our acquaintance. Now the opportunity was gone, and as I bitterly felt, never to return.

While I was thus steeping myself in untold misery, the fiddles and other instruments came to a grand climax, and then stopped. The ladies curtesied to their partners, the gentlemen bowed. Colonel Allayne and the Lady Lettice had ended in our vicinity. The former naturally brought his partner to her hostess. Suddenly she saw me: her face, which had been radiant, clouded; a shadow came upon her brow; the light that had been shining in her eyes died out. I felt as though some one had struck me with a poniard through the heart.

Lady Cranworth remarked to her guest: "I think you know Captain Lesterne well, Lettice?"

"I have the pleasure of his acquaintance," the girl replied coldly. She extended her hand, and I took it. I was surprised to find that it trembled a little in mine, as if she were suffering from some nervous disturbance. I took it for granted, however, that it was due to the excitement of the dance just over.

"Perhaps, Lady Cranworth, you will kindly give

me an introduction to Captain Lesterne; we have met before, but circumstances prevented any formal recognition." Colonel Allayne, as he said this, smiled, and afterwards shook me warmly by the hand, when the formal introduction had been made. His greeting was very different from the one which his partner had accorded me. "You have, I trust," he said, "entirely recovered from the effects of your accident, if I may call it so, really the most dastardly outrage I have ever witnessed."

"I have to thank you, Colonel," I replied, "for so promptly coming to my rescue on that occasion; it might indeed have gone hardly with me had I been left to the tender mercy of Captain Destrier and his fellow-ruffians."

Colonel Allayne laughed. "It was not I who rendered any particular assistance. The real help came from Mistress Lisle's silver whistle and that shock-headed servant of hers. I have never seen any one clear a room so fast as he succeeded in doing."

"You were, I suppose, too much preoccupied to be on your guard, Captain Lesterne. To squire a beautiful lady must be so absorbing, that danger is unheeded," Lady Lettice put in.

Even the Colonel looked at Lady Lettice with some astonishment. She spoke in an ironical tone, which was so unusual with her that it created surprise in her hearers.

"I do not think any one could expect to be suddenly attacked when quietly dining at an inn," I replied.

"No; it would be inexplicable were it not that

Destrier is, I have heard since, an enemy of General Churchill, who has put upon him, I believe, on several occasions, no doubt a well-deserved slight." This last remark came from Allayne.

I asked Lady Lettice after her father, whom I had last seen starting on his journey to bring her to Stonefield Hall. She flushed a little, and seemed a trifle embarrassed. There were others besides our party within hearing distance of what was said. Lady Lettice glanced round at them before replying.

"My father left me here under Lady Cranworth's kind care, and then went abroad for his health."

I could hardly help smiling, remembering that the Earl had hardly suffered a day's illness in his life.

"I hope the same cause will speedily bring him back," I said.

"It may have already done so," Lady Lettice answered, but in much lower tones. She glanced at Colonel Allayne as if they were in some secret together.

Once more I felt the same pang I had experienced when I watched them dancing together in the centre of the saloon. Not so long ago I was the confidant of Lady Lettice's secrets and anxieties. How speedily she had found another to take my place! It was so like a woman, I said bitterly to myself, knowing so little of the sex that I was able to generalise on the scantiest basis.

At this moment the musicians began to tune their instruments preparatory to the next dance, which was to be a pavane. A gentleman whom I did not know came up and claimed the Lady Lettice. I fancied that in her eyes, as she walked away with

her new partner, there was more kindness towards myself than I had seen there before. Once again I questioned what it could be which had come between us, so different was she now from what she had been a bare fortnight before this. An elderly man approached; he engaged Lady Cranworth in conversation. Colonel Fitzroy Allayne and I were left alone; the former was not taking part in the pavane, which, indeed, had only been recently introduced into England, and was therefore not generally known.

In spite of my jealousy of the Colonel, I could not help feeling a liking for him. His courteous demeanour, gallant bearing, and lack of self-consciousness attracted my regard in spite of myself. He now linked his arm in mine, and led me down the room towards the embrasure of a window which flanked the main entrance. It was the spot least open to observation and overhearing on the part of others. No doubt Allayne knew for what purpose I had come. In fact as we walked down the room we could see Mistress Lisle at the further end from the door talking with Lord Cranworth. She was in all probability waiting for an opportunity to speak to the Colonel. Whether he were equally anxious to meet Mistress Lisle was not so apparent.

Events were moving rapidly in the world of politics. Colonel Allayne had doubtless made up his mind as to the course he should pursue. He came of a strong Protestant stock, and was likely to agree with the views of the Earl of Cawston who had landed with William of Orange, as I afterwards knew and already suspected. But to

make up your own mind is one thing ; to impart it to some one else is quite another. At no juncture in the history of those troublous times was a step forward or backward more difficult to retrieve than it was now.

William of Orange, making his headquarters at Exeter, was at the same time advancing his outposts, with that military skill and precision of which he was a master, to the boundaries of Devon and Dorset. The allegiance of those two great cities, Bristol and Plymouth, was already assured to him. On the other hand, James was flooding the district round Salisbury with troops, many of them Roman Catholics, who were almost sure to fight for the present occupant of the throne, if opportunity were given them and a good leader vouchsafed. That James would surrender without a blow no one dreamed on the night of that ball at Stonefield Hall. That he did so eventually was due to an enormous extent to a cause which history has failed to notice. That cause was Mistress Dorothy Lisle. What sapped the courage of the King and unnerved his arm, was the falling away one by one of the leaders of Church and State, of the very officers in his army, to his great rival, and future successor. It was the secret working of a woman of definite purpose and strong will, combined with the crass folly and turpitude of the King himself, which brought about the result the whole world knows at the present day.

Colonel Allayne, in command of an important regiment stationed near Salisbury, was in a very difficult position : although his sympathies were

with William, his outward allegiance was given to King James. He was not alone, of course, in this dilemma ; there were scores of others of equally high rank in the same quandary. It happened that it was not due to Mistress Lisle's persuasions that the decision was arrived at. It came from quite another cause, which will appear immediately. The dance at Stonefield Hall was to prove a turning-point in the careers of not a few of the guests.

Colonel Allayne and I were not destined to reach the embrasure of the window to which he was guiding me. As we passed beyond the dancers into the comparatively free area near the entrance, we heard an altercation going on between one of the servants and some one in the doorway. Doubtless there had been a knock beforehand which had not reached our ears, owing to the sound of the music.

The Colonel and I involuntarily stopped. My companion wondered, doubtless, who would be likely to arrive at this hour of the night. All the guests had been assembled these two hours past. At the same time news was continually being exchanged, and communicated, from the metropolis on the one hand and from the headquarters of William of Orange on the other. It was a peculiar feature of the situation then obtaining that nearly every one had friends on both sides.

Allayne probably thought that the newcomer brought intelligence of some kind, although why, under these circumstances, his entrance was resisted as an intrusion by the servants it was difficult to say. I, on the other hand, was under no such delusion : something told me as surely as if I had heard it with

my actual ears, that the men who were forcing their way into Stonefield Hall had dogged our footsteps, and were come to arrest Mistress Lisle.

I turned round looking in the direction where I had seen her standing a moment before. She was still there and, as it happened, almost alone, except that Abe Salker was just behind her like a shadow. Her eyes were fixed upon us; she was doubtless coming to Colonel Allayne as soon as the pavane was over.

I held up my hand, in which I grasped my gauntlet, removed before I shook hands with Lady Cranworth, and gave her a signal of warning.

After I had done this three times I saw that she understood me, for she stepped back and mingled with the circle of watchers, so that I could see her no more.

I turned round again, satisfied that Mistress Lisle could not be seen by any one entering the room. The manœuvre was executed just in time. When I faced the entrance once more, a man in black stepped into the room. He was evidently an attorney. By his side was an officer with a big, red face.

That officer was Captain Destrier. Behind him came file after file of soldiers.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### THE FIGHT IN THE BALL-ROOM

LOOKING back upon that scene in the great ball-room of Stonefield Hall, invaded as it was by the King's procurator sent to arrest Mistress Lisle, and by Destrier and his men assisting in its execution, I wonder at myself.

I have been through many arduous and unexpected situations and assisted in not a few desperate emprises, yet never was I so swept away from all thought of prudence as on that night. The blow on my head had affected the balance of my judgment; I had been greatly disturbed by the attitude towards me of Lady Lettice; all this helped to concentrate in the loathing I had for Captain Destrier, bully and disgrace to his calling, the author of the cowardly attack on myself.

I did not wait to see how many men and officers there were under Destrier's orders, or pause to consider how my duty lay as regards the escape of Mistress Lisle. Never in my life have I been so blinded with rage, so swept away by uncontrollable passion, as I was at this moment. Behind Destrier I recognised at least two of the officers who had been dining at the table with

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him, at the inn at Dinton, when the foul and dastardly attack had been made upon my person. That one day Destrier and I would meet, and I should make him pay for the wrong he had done me and the crime he had committed, was, I had felt sure, as certain as my own existence. But I had not expected it to come so soon. He had had his turn, now it was mine.

I strode forward without a shadow of hesitation. Although my mind was obsessed with the one overwhelming impulse, I was conscious at the back of my brain of various other impressions. The man in black was the spy I had seen in the doorway of the mill. I heard him now proclaim in a loud, yet shrill, voice which seemed to penetrate every corner of the room, that he had come to arrest Mistress Dorothy Lisle, and that all subjects of His Most Gracious Majesty were commanded to render him assistance in this matter, or undergo the penalty of disloyalty.

The musicians at the end of the room had stopped dead. There was a hush throughout the saloon. In the midst of this impressive silence I flung my gauntlet straight in the face of Captain Destrier, crying :

" You coward and ruffian, we are well met ! "

He reeled backwards for a moment, and instantaneously drew his sword. Mine was already free of its scabbard.

I think Destrier caught something of the light of battle which shone in my eyes ; perhaps it was due to contagion, or it may have been that he was stung to an anger similar to my own by the ignominy

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of the blow I had given him in the face. That was certainly an assemblage in which a man, unless wholly a poltroon, would rise to maintain whatever repute he had retained before the world. Behind him were the troops he commanded, some twenty-five in number, who entered the room in time to see their leader shrink back from my gauntlet. Looking on were men and women of the world, the guests that night of the host and hostess of Stonefield Hall.

Even as our swords crossed I noticed with what agility the man in black skipped behind the soldiers that formed his escort. He had piped his errand like any cock on a scrap-heap, but when fighting was on he had no stomach for it, and Master Greswell, the procurator, made himself scarce.

Destrier and I commenced with a furious onslaught in which science played but a little part. We thrust and struck, struck and thrust again, without any cessation, and with hardly pause to parry the other's weapon, except by that instinct which never altogether leaves the trained swordsman. In the first two minutes both Destrier and I had received slight wounds, just enough to sober us and make us go at our work rather more cautiously. It would seem that this contest would have ended summarily in something similar fashion as did my overthrow at Dinton. I was like to be weighed down by numbers, for one of Destrier's officers, who had formed a member of his party on the former occasion, lunged at me furiously, while I was fully engaged with his superior. Then it was that Colonel Fitzroy Allayne had the die cast for him. In a way I was resisting the authority of the King, although really

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fighting solely in my own quarrel. To assist me was to range himself on the side against the law, and consequently the existing Government; but the Colonel, gallant gentleman that he was, could not see me overpowered with numbers any more than he had been able to do on the previous occasion, when I was a total stranger. He had only his poniard by his side, having, of course, abandoned his sword when dancing. Like lightning he drew this weapon, and was just in time to strike up the blow aimed at me, which would have assuredly have effected my quietus. As it was I received another wound in the left shoulder, although I was hardly conscious of it at the time.

Seeing Allayne join in the fray, all the guests of the sterner sex caught the infection. Swords flew out of scabbards. Others not so armed followed Allayne's example and fought with the dagger. The soldiers ranged themselves on the other side. It became a general skirmish; even the servants of the household, and those who had come with their masters to attend the ball, rushed in by side doors to join in the fray. My own men, Donald Duvain and Duncan Macalister, with a couple of sturdy grooms from the stables, made a diversion from the rear, causing no small panic amongst the escort of the little procurator.

I am writing this down not because I saw it all, for I was too much engaged, but from information I pieced together later.

Gradually as I fought with Destrier my ardour cooled; my anger was not the less, but it assumed a more dangerous form. It was no longer frenzied,

but allied with calculation and judgment. I was determined that my sword should find its way through his defence; that I would make him pay the penalty for the attack which had nearly cost me my life, when I was unarmed. In our fighting we had drifted to one side, now giving a foot, now taking one. The main body of the fray was going on to my right and to his left. Destrier looked at me with eyes starting out of his head; heavy drops of moisture came out upon his skin. The profligate life he had led was no preparation for the prolonged struggle in which he was now engaged.

Slowly fear expressed itself in the glances he cast at me, while he warded off the attacks with what strength he still enjoyed. Once, however, I nearly met with the fate which I destined for him. My foot slipped, and I went down on one knee. He lunged at me furiously, exposed to his mercy by this mishap. His sword struck me where I had been wounded before by the officer, whom Colonel Allayne had prevented doing me a worse injury. The blood spurted out from my shoulder. I turned sick. I had not yet fully recovered from the illness of the last few days. But once more anger nerved me to win the victory. I leapt up and meeting his sword full as he attempted a second blow, gave a twist to my wrist. His weapon flew out of his hand. He turned to fly, but before he could get out of my reach I had driven my point right through his shoulders, until my sword was wedged in his body. He fell with a gasp, and a choking in his throat, full on his face.

It was my last effort. Had I not conquered him

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that moment I should have been at his mercy. My brain reeled, my senses left me; blood welled from the wounds in my shoulder. I stretched out my arms to save myself, but the room was going round and round. I fell heavily, and knew no more.

## CHAPTER XXV

### OUT OF THE VALLEY

THERE is a valley lying between high and precipitous mountains on either hand, which are inaccessible to the hardiest climber and the most nimble foot. It belongs to no country, but it is to be entered from all. I have seen men go down into it, as did my dear father, with the slow step of age, not fearing its darkness, but looking into its depths with calm courage. I have seen men ride into it straight from the battle-field with the sunlight behind them and the mists before so dark and impenetrable that they disappeared instantaneously from mortal view. Women think of that valley more than men do. They face it beforehand, and in that forethought gather strength to tread its gloomy mazes.

I must have looked into that valley during the week that passed, after the tragic ending of the dance at Stonefield Hall. Of those glimpses I can remember barely anything. My brain was in a mist; I was weak from wounds and the effect of previous illness. I was told later that when Dr. Fabius first saw me he shook his head and gave my case up as hopeless. But in Lady Cranworth's abigail, Dame Elstree, the mistress of the Hall had a woman

wondrously skilled in herbals of all kinds. Dr. Fabius being debarred of his one favourite remedy, by the fact that my adversaries had done the work so completely there was little remaining for him to practise upon, I was practically handed over to the care of Dame Elstree. She made for me soothing and strengthening draughts from simples she had herself gathered in the lanes and woods near the park. She bound me up in soft linen under which was an unguent of her own preparation. My Lady Cranworth was a woman of courage and devotion. She believed in my recovery, and prayed that I might be brought back even from the very entrance of the valley, into which my feet were already straying.

The great guest-room of the house had been prepared for my reception. It had an anteroom opening into it, which the women waiting upon me used as an apartment in which all things for my use could be got ready. There, too, Dame Elstree slept every night during the time that my illness was at its height. A couch in this lobby was turned into a bed for the faithful minister to my needs. Now and then, Lord Cranworth's chaplain, the Rev. Septimus Ogilvie, would come and pray by my bedside. At first these ministrants to my need, bodily and spiritual, were like shadows in some dream. Their shapes floated in the mists of my brain. I could not distinguish one from the other. Their voices, which were ever tuned to low notes, sounded to me afar off, as though my ears were filled with some soft material through which their tones had to penetrate.

Gradually I began to come back, to indicate my

wishes and needs, instead of leaving to others to find out what I wanted. I heard later that Lady Cranworth declared it was no small relief to her, that she had this care of me during that time of great public anxiety. It took her away from other thoughts and occupied her attention. She could almost forget her cares for husband and son, in the daily stress of assisting my battle for life against the weakness which threatened to take it away.

After that night at the dance the gentlemen who had taken part on my side, and had routed the officers and troops sent to execute the King's warrant, felt that the die was cast. They were liable to the penalties attaching to high treason for resisting the majesty of the law. Most of them were already strong sympathisers with the Prince of Orange, or rather with the cause which he represented. The affair of the ball decided them. They started for Exeter before the dawn of the succeeding day.

Mistress Lisle had accomplished, unwittingly and without malice aforethought, a great stroke on behalf of the Prince, and had brought about the beginning of the end. The attempt to arrest her caused the fight. With two exceptions with which this narrative has nothing to do, it was the only blood-letting of that remarkably peaceable revolution.

At the time when my Lord Cranworth and his son, the Hon. Fitzroy Allayne, to give him his full title, with other gentlemen of lesser degree, reached William's headquarters at Exeter, there was a lull in the Prince's progress. Men were waiting to see what would happen. The West had been so hardly hit after Monmouth's rebellion that the leaders of

society in Somerset and Dorset, as well as the rank and file, looked on wonderingly to see what progress the invading army would make. One of the fatal defects in Monmouth's attempt had been lack of influential support. William had landed with a very different force at his back. But unless it was proved that the sympathy of Englishmen was with him, and that the invitation to come over which had been accorded him sprang from a real determination to give him support, his cause was foredoomed. The coming of Lord Cranworth at this juncture, together with those who rode in his company, gave the fillip that was needed. Not long after Lord Cornbury, with a portion of his cavalry command, followed suit. From that time forward William's progress was constant and assured.

Mistress Lisle, warned by my uplifted hand, had withdrawn herself from the ball-room and with Abe Salker and Dame Carder, in attendance, had ridden off into the night, whither, no one knew.

When Lady Cranworth was subsequently interrogated on this subject by a magistrate, who came over with an armed escort to make inquisition into the affair, her ladyship was able to say that she had not herself seen or spoken to Mistress Lisle after the King's procurator announced the purport of his errand. Neither had she the slightest idea in which direction the fugitives had gone after they left Stonefield Hall.

Of these events I was naturally entirely ignorant. Even when my mental faculties became clearer, as my bodily strength returned by slow degrees, I seemed to have lost touch with more recent matters.

They were hidden, no doubt, in some recess of my brain which illness had partially closed. I went back to my life at Ash House, to my visitings at Cawston Castle. I had reason to believe that I babbled somewhat in the days of my delirium of the Lady Lettice, but not so that Dame Elstree could understand of whom I spoke.

It was a great day when my kindly watchers thought it well to move me from the great four-post bed, in the centre of the guest-chamber, to the couch in the anteroom, on which Lady Cranworth's confidential woman slept by night. This smaller room, as well as my larger apartment, faced the west, and looked out over the garden at the back of the mansion. The window was low, so that I could lie and in dreamy fashion watch the declining sun of day play upon the leafless trees and the bushes beneath them. It was St. Martin's little summer that year, and although Martinmas had been passed for three or four days his influence still lingered in the open air.

Into this small apartment was brought every day a vase full of fresh-picked grasses, of hedgerow berries, of fern, and yellow bracken, decked by the early frosts with glorious gold. The vase held treasures never twice the same. I could hardly have believed that Nature afforded so much variety at this period of her waning year.

After a while I began to wonder whose hand it was which decked my room with unfailing fore-thought and care. One day I asked Lady Cranworth, when I had begun to take sufficient interest in my surroundings to make inquiry:

"Who is it, my lady, that so kindly chooses for me these autumn growths which I love to see?"

She smiled and seemed a little embarrassed.

"Some one, I expect, who loves the woodlands and the woodland growths, and perhaps has a friendship for the young man who has been ill and is now on his way, we trust with God's mercy, to full recovery."

With this answer, intentionally vague and indistinct, I had to be content. For the mistress of Stonefield Hall, with all her kindness, was a woman of great dignity and presence, one not likely to be made to reply when herself indisposed to do so.

As soon as I was able to enter at all into my surroundings I had missed Duncan Macalister. As I have said, he had been with me in my father's house from my very infancy. As I grew up he had taught me all he knew of the arts of war. When I left my father's house at the invitation of Colonel Churchill, as related in my former work,<sup>1</sup> Macalister had attached himself to my person with my father's full sanction and approval. He had been with me through all my adventures in the army of Turenne, as well as at home, and had never been absent from my side for a single day. When I was ill at the Lamb, Macalister waited on me hand and foot. Now I missed him.

"Where is my body-servant, Duncan Macalister?" I inquired of Dame Elstree, with a weak and quavering voice, very early in my first convalescence.

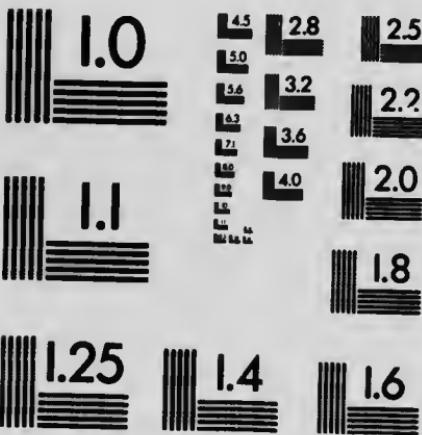
"It was he, and your other great giant of a servant,

"The Adventures of an Equerry."



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Duvain I think they called him, who turned the fight into a victory on the night you were wounded, by coming in at the back of the soldiers and so placing them between two fires. It saved a great deal of bloodshed, because the troopers promptly flung down their arms, finding themselves attacked before and behind ; but it was not thought safe that your two men should remain in the neighbourhood. They have consequently gone in the train of my Lord to the west."

At the time I did not understand this explanation ; I only knew that Macalister had left me, and turning over on my side, I cried like a child. I suppose that the dame knew that this was part of my weakness, physical and mental, for she hushed me to sleep as a mother might a tired babe. She had spoken of a fight, but I remembered none. It may seem almost incredible that the existence of Mistress Lisle and my coming up to Salisbury as her guard and escort, with all that followed upon it, might, in my then condition, never have been. Perhaps some physician of unusual attainment may be able to explain this phenomenon of forgetfulness ; as for me, I cannot attempt it. I can only set it down, knowing it to be a fact, to be received, doubtless, with frank incredulity by those who read these pages.

But as the days passed, and my fibre toughened, my memory came back. I wondered that I had not heard from my master, and began even to take an interest in the news which filtered through to me from the outside world. Lady Cranworth began to be less careful about keeping back from me things which might excite my brain. Perhaps she even

wished to stimulate it a little, to make sure that it had not received permanent injury from the treatment that had laid me low. News came to us from time to time, brought by messengers who came from my Lord Cranworth, or by those huxters in Salisbury who served the Hall with the goods required by its occupants.

One afternoon, as I was lying on my couch, looking out into the garden, and hoping in a day or two I might be strong enough to take my first airing outside the wall of the building, Lady Cranworth came into the anteroom. She began to speak the moment she entered. There was a thrill in her voice which showed considerable excitement.

"Tidings of importance have just been brought to the Hall by Master Hurst, the miller."

I turned round and looked at my Lady, catching the infection of her eagerness. I saw that her face was worn and anxious.

"What is it?" I inquired. "I am afraid from your look, Lady Cranworth, that it is not good news."

"Some men regard it as such, but for those whose hearts are with the Prince of Orange it is quite the contrary. Master Hurst informs me that King James has started for Salisbury, and has given instructions that the palace of the Bishop shall be made ready for his occupation. He is bringing a considerable number of nobles and gentlemen with him, including Prince George of Denmark, the Duke of Grafton, Lord Faversham the Commander-in-Chief, the French Ambassador"—she stopped and looked at me—"and last, but not least, my Lord Churchill."

I gazed at Lady Cranworth in mute surprise. I had thought that my master was living incognito in London. It seemed incredible that he was coming as one of the courtiers and officers in the train of His Majesty. I rose from the couch, and began walking up and down the room. I was strong enough by this time to do so with fairly certain steps, but I felt my wounds, which were nearly healed, throbbing. It would appear that the excitement under which my mind was labouring communicated itself to the body. All my sympathies were now very strongly on the side of the Prince of Orange. The Earl of Cawston, it was known, had landed with the Prince. I could not forget that he was the father of one who seemed separated from me, although resident under the same roof; one whom I had learnt to love with all the intensity of my nature. Lord Cranworth and his son had become open adherents of the Prince, beyond pardon or forgiveness. The affection I had formed for Lady Cranworth made me feel keenly on behalf of her husband, while the fact that Colonel Allayne had twice succoured me at the peril of his own life, and the belief I entertained that Lady Lettice was more than partial to him, made me regard his safety as of the first importance.

Some shadow of jealousy might lurk beneath, but it was not strong enough to overpower the more worthy feelings I entertained for the Colonel. If Churchill had been won over to the side of King James matters might go hardly with the Prince, and with those who had espoused his cause. Faversham, although Commander-in-Chief, was capable of doing

but little. He was unpopular, as a foreigner; he was weak, as a man; the soldiers under him neither trusted nor loved him; he would never have won the battle of Sedgemoor if it had not been for my master.

Lady Cranworth had sunk down into a chair. It seemed as if her legs were no longer capable of supporting her body. I could see similar thoughts, to the ones which were passing through my brain, were likewise disturbing hers.

"You think, Lady Cranworth, that Lord Churchill has been won over to the side of the King, and will fight against the Prince of Orange?"

"Master Hurst tells me it is rumoured that Lord Churchill has been accorded higher rank, and seems to be in high favour with the King."

"I cannot believe that my master will change."

Lady Cranworth looked at me as if to see how I would take what she had to say next.

"Why not?" she inquired. "You know there are those who do not like the General. They say—forgive me, I do not want to hurt you, but it makes one doubt—that he has been coquetting with both sides, and that he is open, even now, to the highest bidder."

I lifted my head proudly. "I should like to drive the lies home to them. My master has been in doubt, as who has not throughout the length and breadth of England? He is a patriot, and loves his country, but he loves his religion, too, and I can declare, who know him best, that he will never be a party to handing over England to the priests of Rome. In addition, as Mistress Lisle has shown Lord Churchill, James is a Stuart, and the blood which gave

up Strafford to his foes and allowed Laud to die a martyr's death, runs in the veins of the present King. If James has changed, my master may change; not otherwise."

"James may have pretended to change. He has promised much ere this, and what has come of it?"

"Lord Churchill is not one easy to be deceived," I replied.

"Yet he is coming with the King."

"It is the shortest way to the west," I answered.

And with that we had to be content. When I went to bed that night I tossed about for hours and could not sleep. Something hitherto had tied my tongue: I felt that I could not ask after the Lady Lettice since my convalescence, lest I should get an answer which in my weakness I could not sustain without betraying myself. Now, there had come this fresh complication with regard to him, whom I not only served, but loved and admired with every fibre of my being. When at last sleep did come to me it was only to bestow upon me dreams more hateful than waking realities.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### IN THE GARDEN OF THE HALL

THE day but one following that afternoon on which Lady Cranworth had given me the intelligence which disturbed us both so much, I felt myself strong enough to take the first turn in the sheltered garden at the back of the Hall. The sun shone, the west wind blew, the air was soft and yet refreshing, with a light breeze playing on my temples.

After all, in spite of the anxieties which weighed upon me as much as ever, I felt it was indeed good to live. Every one knew by now that the King was approaching Salisbury with a great retinue. He might arrive at any moment. Expectation was on the tiptoe of excitement. It penetrated even to the Hall. The servants spoke together in corners. No one seemed capable of paying attention to any work for long together.

It was the nineteenth of November. William of Orange had been in the country now for a fortnight. Not a few of his adherents were disappointed that he had not made greater progress in the time. His outposts had reached the confines of Devon and Dorset, but had not as yet ventured further. It was difficult for those who did not know the Prince to

understand his slow, sure nature. They mistook prudence for diffidence, caution for something very like fear. William, however, knew perfectly that time was on his side.

James had only to be given the opportunity to undermine his own authority and ruin his chances.

I, personally, knew the Prince as none others did at the Hall. My master likewise knew and admired him. The more I thought of him, the more I felt assured that all would yet be well. Perhaps my returning strength and the beauty of that November day lent colour to my hopes. Had I felt weaker, and the day been less bright, my conclusions might have been quite different. I had come out alone, and after pacing up and down for some time on the gravelled walk before the mansion, I felt myself equal to extending the area of my stroll.

I walked down between the boles of the fruit-trees towards the high wall which bounded the orchard. Against this wall were trained peaches, plums, nectarines, along <sup>the</sup> whole length. It faced south. In the centre o<sup>r</sup> was the wicket-gate leading into a spinney <sup>which</sup> itself was within the boundary of the

I was standing quite quietly under a tall pear-tree, leaning my shoulder against it by way of support, drinking in the air, when I heard the wicket-gate open close to me. I turned, and at once my heart began to beat violently. A girl was coming in, clad in walking dress with a sun-bonnet on her head. In her arms was a bundle of spoils gathered from the hedgerows. It was from just such a bunch of autumn growths that my vase had been recruited

every day during my illness. The girl's face was, to a great extent, hidden from me, for she was looking down and her sun-bonnet cast a shade right down to her chin, but I had no doubt as to who it was. Love told me, and love makes few mistakes.

I could not step forward to meet her; I seemed spellbound. My breath came and went. I had no idea before how weak I was. My legs, which had supported me well enough down the garden path, now refused to do my bidding. I could neither approach her nor fly from her presence.

She came close to me, and yet I did not move. Then in a moment she looked up. Our eyes met. There were tears in hers of which she seemed ashamed. It seemed for a moment as if she would turn away and go back through the wicket-gate, but determination came to her aid. She stepped up to me.

"Good morning, Captain Lesterne; I am delighted to see you out again." She held out her hand, while her left arm still clasped her woodland nosegay. I took it and raised it to my lips. I could say nothing; I could not even thank her for her welcome. She noted my weakness, misunderstanding its cause. She thought that I had come further than my strength would as yet allow.

"May I give you an arm back to the house?" she said. "I am not Mistress Lisle, but perhaps I shall do instead—until she comes back?" The Lady Lettice's lip quivered, although she glanced at me steadily enough.

When the Lady Lettice mentioned Mistress Lisle a strange confusion of ideas came into my mind. I suppose it was due to the weakness I was still

suffering from, and the excitement of so suddenly meeting with the centre of all my thoughts during these last days.

At any rate, my mind went back to another girl standing in a garden, and to a bunch of violets. I seemed to scent them on the air. Yet the Lady Lettice carried none of them, only a bunch of woodland growth, the spoils of the late autumn. Then gradually my perception cleared, and at the same time I felt I should like to rest. Near me was the stump of an old tree which had been hollowed out, whether intentionally or not, into the semblance of a seat.

"Have I your permission," I said, "to sit down? My legs seem a little tired."

Her quick sympathy went out to me at once. Perhaps her conscience smote her for the little gibe she had uttered to a man in my condition. "Let me help you," she said, and under my right arm she placed her own hand. I do not think that I actually needed her support—indeed, but for the stress of the feeling which had come upon me I could walk fairly well—but I did not refuse her proffered assistance. Nay, I was sorry when the distance was covered to the improvised seat.

Sitting down I was able to look up into her face under her sun-bonnet. Before she had the advantage of me, being able to glance upwards when she chose, and when the contrary, to hide her face altogether. I think the Lady Lettice knew that I was now in the better place, as regards the contest between us of tell-tale looks, for she glanced into my eyes shyly; then, perhaps reading something there,

turned half away. Her fingers were playing with the berries she had plucked. They showed up red against her hands, on which were no gloves, and against her white dress, which was of warm material but of summer hue.

I imagine that what she had read in my eyes just now puzzled her. It did not fit with the conception she had at the back of her mind. She seemed to be groping for a truth which did not come to her readily.

As soon as I was sufficiently master of myself, and brain and speech had come more into unison, and under control, I went back to the words she had uttered. They had remained upon my recollection as though written on a piece of paper by some one, and lodged before my eyes, not as if they were words actually addressed to myself. This also was part of my weakness.

"You spoke of Mistress Lisle just now," I said. "What of her? I am afraid I had almost forgotten her existence. I hope she is in safety. I remember bringing her to Stonefield Hall, and of the dance—" Suddenly my thoughts cleared. The dress Lady Lettice wore now was a very different material and cut from the one she had ~~worn~~ at the ball, but the colouring was somewhat ~~the same~~—sufficiently so to bring back the other scene vividly to my mind. I broke off inconsequently, ~~I have~~ never seen anything so beautiful."

She looked at me in surprise. "I do not understand. To what are you referring?"

The Lady Lettice could hardly appreciate ~~the~~ weakness of my brain at this period. It is difficult

for those who are in full health to enter into the condition, mental and physical, of one coming back as I had done from the very gates of the grave. She was trying to understand what I said, my changes of phrase; while on my part, I was attempting to piece together the past and the present. The threads of experience had been broken off when I fell, and it was impossible for me to bridge the gulf between that night when I had ridden to Stonefield Hall and this morning, when I walked in the sunlight and sat with Lady Lettice before me on the stump of the old tree. As I did not answer her last question immediately, after a while she asked it again. Something within her demanded the reply.

"What was very beautiful?"

I turned and looked at her, and she, half turning too, met my eyes full. I was not in a condition to fence or to hide what thoughts I had; I could only reply according to my limitations. She asked a question, and I answered it bluntly.

"You, of course. Whom else should I mean?"

She blushed hotly. "I thought you meant the ball altogether; the dresses; the decorations of the saloon. I should not have asked if I had thought—" she broke off abruptly.

"I only saw you," I repeated—"you and the Colonel. You danced together." I felt myself grow pale, so that once more she stretched out her hand to me. I took it, and did not let it go. My lip quivered. I asked what I should not have asked if I had been more master of myself. "I suppose you love him very much?"

"Who?" she cried, and made as if she would take away her hand, but she did not, perhaps in sympathy with the quivering of my lips and the paleness of my face.

"Colonel Fitzroy Allayne."

"Love him?" she said, with a toss of her head; "why should I? He has never asked me, and if he had—"

"Well!" I said. "Well, and if he asks you?"

"Why should I tell you, Captain Lesterne?"

"Because I want to know. Because I have thought of it, and dreamt of it every day and night, as I lay in the great bed in the room yonder." I waved my left hand towards the house; my right still held hers.

Lady Lettice relented. I think there was truth and pathos in my voice as well as weakness.

"I should not say him nay, because, because—" she broke off again. "It is stupid of me to talk like this. Colonel Allayne has known me since I was a child. He regards me as a child still, and if he cares at all, which I doubt, it is for some one else. Until you spoke of him in this way such a thought had never crossed my mind. He is staid and old, or so at least it seems to me." The Lady Lettice pouted her lips and made herself look younger than she was. It was a trick she had when she wanted to weedle something, he was not too disposed to give, out of her father, the Earl. It was wondrous fetching under that sun-bonnet to me who looked on. I thought I heard my death sentence in her words.

"I am full ten years older t' an you," I suggested.  
"What do you mean?" she inquired, with affected

surprise. "I do not see that you have anything to do with it."

"I am old and staid, too, like the Colonel."

"Are you?" she asked. She put her head a little on one side and gave me a considering glance, as if trying to see me in some new aspect which had not dawned upon her before.

"Now," she said, "how funny, I have never deemed you either old or staid. I thought I could do what I liked with you, until, until—"

"Why until?" I asked.

Perhaps she was not minded to reply, for she harked back to the Colonel.

"I could not do what I liked with Colonel Allayne ever. He orders me about as if he were my father."

This was a new aspect of the girl to me. I had never seen Lord Cawston exercise any particular authority over his daughter. In my reading of it, it was quite the other way. The Lady Lettice did just what she liked with him. However, this point did not interest me so much. I wanted to know what she meant by that word "until."

"You said 'until' just now. Until what?"

She pouted again. "That must have been a cosy meal you had at the inn at Dinton. What a pity that it was so rudely disturbed. Colonel Allayne told me about it. He was quite full of it when he came here the next day. He said, too, that Mistress Lisle was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his life, and quite young." She stopped, considered, looked at me; then asked the question which I believe she did not wish to ask, but

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necessity compelled. "She is not at all like me, I suppose?"

"No," I replied, "not at all."

"Oh!" she said. But what she meant by "Oh!" I did not know then, and she has never told me since.

"There is no one like you. At least I have never seen any one."

"Of course there are different styles," she admitted. "Every one cannot be so surpassingly beautiful as Mistress Lisle."

"I have never thought about her beauty. It is nothing to me."

"Dr. Fabius told me that she was terribly distressed when you lay so ill those first days at the Lamb at Salisbury. Dr. Fabius said, too, she was very beautiful."

"Did he?" I asked. "He is an old man."

"Yes, but they know a beautiful woman when they see one. I am not sure that they are not worse than the young ones. If you did not think her so beautiful, why did you bring her to Salisbury? I heard nothing of this when you were at Cawston last. You did not even mention it to me that morning when we parted at the coach door."

"I had never seen her until the previous night."

Somewhat during this conversation my ideas had cleared. I think, too, that what the Lady Lettice had told me about Colonel Allayne helped me not a little. It seemed to give me a new heart, and a new courage; out of these came strength of both mind and body.

"When I left you, or rather when you left me,

on the high-road, I had no thought otherwise than that I should accompany my master whithersoever he went. It was he who bade me take Mistress Lisle to Salisbury, and since I have been here I have had further orders under his hand to be at her disposal. That was why I brought her to Stonefield Hall."

The Lady Lettice looked a little incredulous. I was wearing the very dress I had on when the note was handed me in the Lamb by Lord Churchill's messenger. It had lain in the pocket of my doublet ever since. Seeing her look of doubt, I put my hand into the pouch, drew out the paper and handed it to her. She read it through aloud.

"The recipient of this note is requested to place himself entirely at the disposal of her in whose company he arrived, and to further her wishes in every possible way; by doing so, he will please, as heretofore, the inscriber of this letter."

Lady Lettice smiled. It was like sunshine after rain. She held the note between her finger and thumb, surveyed it, pondered it. "Did you place yourself entirely at the disposal of her in whose company you arrived? Did you further her wishes in every way?" She looked at me sternly, like a judge interrogating a prisoner, only that there was a twinkle in her eye which is not always in that of a judge.

"I did what she told me," I replied lamely.

"That was why you came here," she suggested.

"I should have come earlier if it had not been for Mistress Lisle."

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"Oh, she kept you away, did she, the minx?"

"I had to await her orders. I had intended coming the morning of the same day that she asked me to escort her in the afternoon."

"Then you did want to come, Captain Lesterne?"

"I never wanted anything so much, except, except—" I stammered, and did not know how to end my sentence.

"Had we not better go in?" she suggested; "it is getting late. Lady Cranworth will be wondering what has become of you. Perhaps she may have missed me, too."

As I looked into the Lady Lettice's face I saw that she had caught my infection. She was confused, too. It showed itself by the way her colour came and went. I think also she was biting her lip, for a little spot of blood trickled down into the dimple of her chin. She had released her hand some time ago, and now with dainty kerchief wiped it away.

It was curious, but her confusion seemed to give me determination. I felt my own disturbance giving way to a greater certainty of will than I had had since my accident.

"Lady Lettice, I have been telling you a great deal—"

Again she put on her childlike expression, thrusting out her lower lip. "Not very much," she protested.

"I have answered all your questions."

"Have you?" she said. "I do not remember that I asked any."

"You have done nothing else," I replied severely, "since you found me in the garden."

"You found me. I was just on my way to the house. I was never so surprised in my life."

"You were bringing something to ornament my room." I put out my hand and touched the woodland bouquet she was holding.

"How do you know that, Sir Prophet?"

"A prophet," I replied, "is one who knows the future."

"Well, you spoke of the future. You said I was going to ornament your room."

"Yes, but I judged by the past. Who but you has placed the things I love, or at any rate gathered them to be placed there, on my table?"

She turned half away. "Perhaps one of the maidens, or my Lady Cranworth herself."

"You are fencing with me," I cried, "Lady Lettice."

It is astonishing how much this interview and my fast rising hopes had braced my whole system. I felt no need, now, of support from the tree-stump, which I was glad enough of in my weakness a few minutes earlier. Neither did my brain seem the same which had played me so false during the last fortnight. Such is the exhilaration of expectancy. I knew that the Lady Lettice would not have talked to me as she did if she had cared not at all. She might like to play with me a little; to keep me on the brink of suspense. To admit that, is to say that she was a woman, feminine to her finger-tips, but she was too true a woman, too fine a character, to be a heartless coquette, especially to a man just rising from a bed of sickness, almost from the very jaws of death itself.

'And—and—if I admit it? Do you think that when you were so ill I had forgotten those days at Cawston? I could not wait upon you, that was the part of others. All I could do was to see that as soon as you were able to look upon them the growths I knew you loved were there to be seen.'

"You interrupted me just now," I remarked.

"Did I?" she said, with great innocence, and surprise in her tone.

"Yes, I told you that you had asked questions many, to which I have replied. I was going to add that now it was my turn. I am going to ask you a question, Lady Lettice."

I stood up in my eagerness, and my voice trembled.  
"I love you with all my heart."

Now she had the advantage. She bent down so that the sun-bonnet completely concealed her face, even to the dimple on her chin, which had been allowed to appear before. Very low she said, so low that it barely reached my ears:

"That is not a question."

Then I waxed very bold, for I put my hand under her chin and raised her face, with my other arm about her shoulders.

"To ask my question," I said, "I must see your eyes and lips. I cannot ask it of a sun-bonnet. I have told you I love you with all my heart. Lettice, do you love me? Can you make me happy, the happiest man in the world? Will you marry me?"

She must have felt that my whole frame vibrated; that I was throbbing with eagerness, yet, as was her nature, she parried the attack still. I could lift her head, but I could not make her raise her eyes—they

were hidden under her lids ; her long lashes rested on her rounded cheek.

" You have asked three questions," she protested ; " you spake of one."

" Answer one," I cried, " and I am content to answer the other two myself."

" Hush, I hear some one coming. Do let me go." Yet she did not struggle very hard ; perhaps it was out of consideration : she remembered that I was still weak. It was quite true, for I also could hear the sound of footsteps.

" Lettice ! " I implored, " do give me an answer. Do make me—happy. Do—"

" I am sure it is Lady Cranworth," she interrupted.  
" Never mind : I must have an answer."

Then very loth came : " If my father—"

" Yes ? "

" I think I could love you." With that she broke away and ran towards the house. She seemed to have forgotten that I needed support ; or rather, perhaps she rightly judged that she had given it to me.

Lady Cranworth was coming towards us. Lady Lettice was running, I walking after her, more leisurely. She passed the mistress of the Hall with a little nod, and probably a smile, but that I could not see, as I was behind her. Lady Lettice left me to make the explanation. When I saw Lady Cranworth's look of surprise I almost laughed. When she reached me she said :

" What is the meaning of all this ? What have you said and done to Lettice ? Her face is all crimson. She seemed not to wish to speak to me."

I took Lady Cranworth's hand. I had grown very fond of her during the days of my illness and convalescence. "I have asked Lettice to be my wife," I said.

"Your wife?" she cried, "why, I thought there was some one else."

"Did you, too, think that, Lady Cranworth?"

"Yes, of course I did. Dr. Fabius was so very certain on the matter, and I believe my son thought so, too."

I had it on the tip of my tongue to say that I had thought Colonel Fitzroy Allayne was himself interested, to a considerable degree, in Lettice Latour, but I had sufficient wisdom to hold my tongue. Instead I remarked: "I have never loved any one else. As to Mistress Lisle, I was her escort by Lord Churchill's command. She is much too preoccupied with the cause she has embraced, and the business she has in hand, to think of anything else for the present. When she does, there is a Dutch kinsman of hers, Count Cornelius Zulestein, nephew of Prince William's cousin, who would like to be all the world to her."

"That is very interesting," Lady Cranworth said, as we walked towards the house. "I am glad we were all wrong. I have learnt to like you very much, Captain Lesterne, and I have loved Lettice from her infancy. She is wayward sometimes, but her nature is both deep and true, and she will make a loving and good woman in the right man's hands."

"I am not worthy of her, I know. Perhaps, too, the Earl may not think me of sufficient rank."

"As for worthiness, I think you will do, Captain

Lesterne, although I do not want to flatter you. With reference to the other matter, you belong to an old family, and have wealth quite as great as Lord Cawston himself. Granting these things, the Earl will agree to what Lettice wishes. He always does, you know. She rules him, and I have no doubt in the end she will rule you."

I laughed. "I hope it may come to that, or something else."

"We shall see. At any rate you will have my help, Captain Lesterne, if Lettice really loves you and that fact I shall ascertain before many minutes are over."

With that she left me.

It was the first day that I was down to the morning meal at noon. Dinner was always served at the Castle at five o'clock. I felt strong enough to take my place at the table. I was in the smaller saloon first, where the meal was laid. Two men-servants were waiting. Lady Cranworth came in. As she passed me to reach the head of the table she gave my hand a little squeeze. The servants would not notice it, but I knew it meant much. I felt myself throb with joy, for that touch confirmed my hopes.

During the time that had elapsed since I parted with Lady Cranworth I had been doubting. That is the nature of the disease of love, from which I was suffering. It has its tides like the sea. Hopes ebb and flow; assurance may be a rock, but it is sometimes covered by the waters, so that one would hardly suspect that it existed at all.

Two or three minutes later the Lady Lettice came in. She hardly looked at me, but seemed very

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interested in what was served; although I noticed that later she hardly touched it at all. Lady Cranworth talked of many things, and I answered as best I could, but whether what I said was to the point it would be hard to say.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### THE COMING OF THE KING

THE midday meal had drawn to a close. We had just risen from the table when the major-domo came in to speak to Lady Cranworth. He was full of excitement, and, punctilious as he always was, he barely waited for permission to speak before doing so.

"The King, my lady, is to arrive in Salisbury this afternoon. A message has come to the Castle, to that effect, in the last five minutes."

Lady Cranworth turned white. "Then there will be fighting," she said. Once more she thought of husband and son. I turned and looked at Lady Lettice; the Earl was with the Prince. She answered my look of sympathy. I cursed my own incapacity, for I knew that for a month to come, at least, perhaps longer, I should not be able to take my place in any fighting that might be going on. I was weak and helpless, when I would have given the world to be strong and helpful. I should like to have stood by the Earl and proved at any rate my prowess in his presence, and, if occasion served, guard him in the hour of danger.

"How far off," Lady Cranworth asked, "is the army of the Prince?"

Lester, the major-domo, and butler of the Hall, replied: "There is rumour of fighting, my lady, I know not how far it is true, at Warminster, between the cavalry under General Kirke and some of the Prince of Orange's troops."

Lady Cranworth clasped her hands, and I think she uttered some prayer, for her eyes were raised to heaven. "That is very near," she said.

"A little more than twenty miles, my lady."

"Is the King coming with a large force?"

"They say, my lady, that he is bringing a regiment of Irish soldiers, as well as his English guard."

"Heaven defend us and those we love!"

"They will pass near here, will they not?" Lady Lettice put in.

"Yes, my lady, within half a mile."

"I should like to see them go by, Lady Cranworth, would not you?"

The mistress of the Hall put her hand to her side. "I do not know," she said. "It would try me very much. I cannot tell how far I could bear it."

"Two or three of the windows of the home-farm, my lady, abut on the high-road," Lester suggested.

"I know that."

"It would be an excellent place to see them pass," Lady Lettice remarked.

"I should like to go with you," I suggested. I turned to Lady Cranworth. "Do you think it is too far for me to walk?"

"You could have the small coach. It would do you good to get an airing. I could trust Lettice with you, and you could both tell me, when you came back, what you have seen."

"You are sure you will not come yourself, Lady Cranworth?" Lettice asked.

"No, I would rather remain here."

So at two o'clock Lettice and I started on our first expedition together in the smaller coach drawn by a pair of horses, which Lady Cranworth used for her own visits to the city. She was often in the habit of going to the cathedral for service, finding it restful.

We were received at the home-farm with many curtsies by Dame Denbrow, its mistress. We found all the farm agog with excitement. The men-servants were on the roof, which had a gutter running round it, and sloping sides. Denbrow himself was with them, but came down to receive us when he saw the coach draw up to the door. The farmer and his wife had been apprised before of our intention. The women-servants and dairymaids were collected in one of the bedrooms, built into the wall of the high-road. Two of the best chairs of the house had been placed in the window of an apartment occupying a similar situation. Master Denbrow and his wife showed us to this room. The mistress of the farm had spread a table, and laid on it some of her own confections, and home-brewed wine, in case we needed refreshment. Lady Lettice thanked her very prettily for her attention, and took a little of one of the cakes. I was not sorry to have some of the wine, for my strength, what little there was of it, had been tried by the jolting of the coach on the rough road to the farm.

After Mistress Denbrow had retired, Lady Lettice and I were left alone. Before us the road was lined

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with people, who had come from the neighbouring villages to see the royal procession. I watched their faces, and wondered what was in their minds. They were a stolid folk, mostly clad in smock-frocks. They reminded me—I wondered whether it was ominous—of Monmouth's following.

As we sat there waiting, Lettice slipped her hand in mine. I knew it to be her way of confirming the compact made that morning.

We had been sitting about half an hour when we saw a company of horsemen ride past towards the direction from which the King was coming. I knew some of them by sight. They included my Lord Faversham, the Earl of Dartmouth, General Edward Sackville, Lord Dumbarton, and Lord Forbes, the last-named in the uniform of the Royal Irish Regiment, which he commanded. He had a strong, resolute face. I had only seen him once before, but his was a countenance not to be forgotten. I little thought as he rode by that had his counsel been accepted by James, a short time after this, the whole course of the history of England might have been altered. Directly the King arrived in Salisbury, Forbes urged him to complete his previous intention and arrest Churchill. But once more James wavered. His hesitation cost him his crown.

Immediately after these noblemen and gentlemen had passed we heard the roll of the drums. I felt Lady Lettice press my hand. The excitement on her beautiful face was indeed great as she leant forward.

Soon the commencement of the procession was in sight. First came the King's English Guards,

on horseback. Not a cheer went up from the crowd as they passed by. The air was filled with a sullen silence. The soldiers seemed to feel the chill of their reception, for they rode dejectedly; I have never seen men look less martial. Behind the Guards followed some of the officers, headed by the Earl of Faversham, who had gone out to welcome James. Then round the corner of the road the King's coach appeared, drawn by six horses. On either hand were the Duke of Grafton and Lord Forbes. By the side of the King sat his son, the Duke of Berwick; through the windows of the coach we could see their faces quite clearly. James stared straight in front of him, taking no notice of the rustics who lined the road. The latter had, indeed, taken off their caps, but no attempt at a cheer was even made. It was by the orders of this dark-browed man that first General Kirke and then Jeffreys had harried the west, leaving the trail of blood behind them in the name of justice. Kirke and Jeffreys were the tools of a monarch who knew not the meaning of mercy. These Wiltshire peasants were not likely to forget the lesson which had bitten deep into their very hearts.

So the King's coach went by. Behind it rode Lord Churchill.

Of all that company he was the least moved. He might have been taking his part in some formal parade.

I thought he looked at us for a moment, but was not quite certain.

The Irish horse regiments brought up the rear. The procession had gone on its way to Salisbury.

"The King is doomed," Lady Lettice whispered to me; "I saw it in his face."

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### MISTRESS LISLE AND THE KING

AFTER a more mature experience of the sex than had been accorded me at the time when these things were happening, I have come to the conclusion that there are two ways in which a woman may make herself attractive—indispensable—to a man with whom she is bound up in the mysterious woof of life; one is by adapting herself to his moods, the other by compelling his sympathy with the chameleon-like varieties of her own. In other words, she must either adapt herself, or him; they start, by their very nature, poles asunder.

Lettice belonged to the latter order. She fascinated, compelled, attracted me into the orbit of her ever-varying personality.

During the three weeks that followed the arrival of the King in Salisbury I went to school in the Lady Lettice's academy of the applied arts. Then I had to leave it, with the inspiring lesson barely begun. It would be idle to speak of that period in which only one thing happened. We felt so much and did so little.

On the night of the twenty-first of November, two days after the royal coming to Salisbury, I was about

to retire to rest, in my weak state going to bed early, when Lester came and requested me in a mysterious, confidential manner to go down to the main entrance. I had been expecting a communication from my master, so was not surprised at the summons, which I obeyed with alacrity. To reach the principal doorway I had to pass through the saloon, in which the ball had been held on the evening of my arrival at Stonefield Hall. The sight of it brought back all the memories of that eventful time. The great room seemed strangely empty ; there were no musicians in the gallery ; no guests danced in the centre, or stood about the sides of the room. I wondered what had become of Mistress Lisle, of Abe Salker, who had disappeared into the night leaving no traces behind them, and from whom no tidings had come since. These wonderings, I need not say, were not with me for the first time, but I am afraid that the absorbing interest which had supervened had ousted almost everything else from my thoughts. Following the footsteps of the dignified major-domo, I passed very near to the scene where Captain Destrier had received my gauntlet in his face, where he and I had fought, and where he had met his well-deserved fate. Here I, too, had nearly received my quietus.

Filled with these memories and associations, I reached the entrance passage. Just within the door, there stood a man enveloped in a long horseman's cloak, booted to his knees, with workman-like spurs on his heels. He had not removed his hat, which he wore well over his forehead. I had no difficulty in recognising in this half-disguised personage Lord

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Churchill. Outside, I could hear the jingling of horse accoutrements and the low murmuring of men's voices. My master was not alone.

"You are better, Lesterne? But not, I suppose, strong enough yet to ride far?"

Master Hurst, the miller, had by my directions given the General a full account of what had happened, and explained to him my condition, otherwise, of course, I should have waited upon him at Salisbury directly he arrived.

"I am afraid not, my lord. I have not yet tried to get into the saddle. The giddiness from which I have been suffering since my accident has not altogether left me."

Churchill did not seem to be listening to my reply. When I came to look closely into his face I saw disturbance there, for almost the only time during my long association with him.

"I have come to say goodbye. The die is cast. We ride towards Axminster to-night."

"You are going to join the Prince?" I said.

The General did not reply for a moment. When he spoke he seemed to be addressing a larger audience than my single self.

"God knows I have been driven to this! I loved James, I owe him everything, yet I love the religion and the liberties of England even more. Even here at Salisbury a priest sits at his elbow; he begins his day with a mass; the bishops and peers of the realm ask him for a free Parliament, and he refuses to grant it. At this very moment Faversham and Forbes are imploring him to arrest me and Grafton, who is with me." He made a gesture towards the

place where the sound of horses and men on the gravel drive came to my ears. "The Prince is the only alternative. After to-night it might be out of my power to adopt it. So I go. The duke goes with me, and about thirty officers and men."

Churchill laid his hand on my shoulder. "Don't forget, Lesterne, that this is the bitterest moment of my life. I would almost as leave fling myself into the river, that flows hard by Salisbury city, as I would do this deed with which England will ring on the morrow." He squeezed my hand in his, turned on his heel, and strode out of the door.

Immediately afterwards I heard the horses gallop away. I had had no time to tell him of my sympathy, or that I believed him right.

Three weeks later Churchill came for me again. He was high in command now under William of Orange. I rode with him in the Prince's train towards Windsor.

The Lady Lettice and I had parted, with attempted gaiety on her part, and not a little gloom on mine. No one knew as yet what would happen. It seemed highly improbable that James wou'd render his kingdom without a blow. Lord Cawst was with us, so that his daughter had to part with father and lover at the same moment. Lord Godfrey had been left behind on garrison work in the west.

I saw much of William during the days that followed. He had always been silent, but now he was more preoccupied than ever. He had taken on, I fancied, an added dignity. Great man as my

master ever seemed to me, there was something about the Prince which dwarfed even him.

So at length we arrived at Hungerford, where the Prince was met by the Earl of Nottingham, Lord Godolphin, and Lord Halifax, on behalf of James. My master took part in the meeting that ensued. This was on the tenth of January; on the following day news came that the King had fled from London.

The next week was filled with varying tidings. James was recaptured and brought back to Whitehall, much to the disgust of the Prince, as my master informed me. He was received by the people of London in a manner which previously hardly seemed possible. They shouted as if he were the saviour and upholder of the liberties of city and realm. William met the situation with firmness and judgment. He was now at Windsor, and he declined to treat with James except on the condition that his own troops should mount guard at Whitehall; in other words, that James should be virtually a prisoner.

During this period I saw but little of Churchill. To him had been intrusted the command of all the troops round London. I was constantly sent on errands to convey his orders in various directions. Generally my instructions reached me in writing.

I was consequently not surprised when one evening I was ordered to take half a dozen chosen men, who could be relied upon to exhibit discretion, and make my way by boat to London Bridge. Here I was to await the coming of some one who would hand me Churchill's ring. With the ring I should receive directions what to do next.

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It was a stormy night when we started. I had Duncan Macalister with me, and Donald Duvain, in addition to the file of men. My servants had rejoined me at Salisbury. We were all cloaked; the rain drove in our faces as the barge was rowed by the soldiers to London Bridge. The character of the night caused the river-way to be deserted; it was not a time either when gay parties might be expected to be on the water, going to, or returning from, some revel. All London was waiting quietly for the next step, whatever it might be.

I ordered the boat to be pulled to the steps. Directly its keel grated against them, a figure in a long grey mantle descended from above. It was followed immediately by a much stouter shape. The first I saw to be a woman; the second was undoubtedly a man. I held out my hand; I felt a ring slipped into it.

"To Whitehall," she directed.

My surprise was intense.

"Mistress Lisle!" I said.

"Hush!"

I assisted her into the boat. Close at her heels came Abe Salker.

Mistress Lisle took her seat in the bow. Not a word was spoken. I gave the necessary command. We started.

I wondered what it all meant. This I knew to be a very different duty from the military evolutions which had passed through my hands since our arrival in London. I went back, mentally, over the past. I thought of the night when I had challenged this girl in the gateway of Ash House; our first meeting.

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The interview which followed, between Mistress Lisle and my master, came back to me vividly. Its fruits were being gathered every day as Lord Churchill drew a network of military encampments round the metropolis. Then came our ride; my overthrow at the inn, by Destrier and his companions; the meeting at the mill; the impassioned appeal of Count Cornelius Zulestein; finally the visit to Stonefield Hall, and my warning to Mistress Lisle that her arrest was imminent.

Beyond these personal recollections I saw that still figure in the bow as the centre of a wider movement; as the instigator of many personal defections from the cause of King James; as the arch-weaver of a wide web of conspiracy and revolution.

The mystery of the night was about us. There was something congruous about the moaning wind, the lapping of the dark water against the sides of the barge, the patterning of the rain on the decks. The very air seemed charged with terror, with gloom, with anticipation.

Nemesis, in frail but unmistakable shape, sat waiting; waiting for I knew not what. Lord Churchill must have known something when he sent me. Probably William, who knew all things, knew the errand on which Mistress Lisle was going. Great had been her wrongs; great had been her services. She had only to ask anything at this juncture I could well understand, and get it from the Prince.

Mistress Lisle did not seem to heed my presence, or indeed to be aware of her environment. The wind and the rain swept her all unnoticed. Intent was her gaze into the future. She saw what none of

us saw, but it was not with bodily eyes. The long looked for, the long worked for, the long waited for, the intensely expected, had well-nigh come. Only once did she make any movement from that set position she had taken up when she first entered the boat. There was a pause when those who had been rowing relinquished the oars and fresh soldiers took their place. Then Mistress Lisle turned round and made me a gesture. It was impossible to mistake it. She was urging me not to delay. She was afraid she might be too late for the errand on which she was going.

After a while we reached the steps. At a little distance could be seen the lights of the palace. Charles I. had stepped out from the balcony, on the further side, to his martyrdom. James had feared of late that the fate of the father, with perhaps more reason, would be the heritage of the son. What was the King—for king he still was in name—thinking now? Care had been taken that he should be informed of all that was going on; of the cordon Churchill was drawing round the city; of the disbanding of his own troops, and the ever strengthening power of his great adversary.

When the barge pulled up, I noticed that another one was waiting close by. It was not actually at the steps themselves, but hidden under the lea of some outbuildings, a few yards away, so that a summons could bring it up at a minute's notice.

Then I began to understand what was impending.

I sprang on to the landing. It was slimy, and overgrown with water-weeds, so that I nearly fell. Recovering myself, I stretched out my hand to

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Mistress Lisle to follow me. Abe Salker came next. He, too, had not uttered a word. It seemed awesome to be conducting two people, who were performing the task they had set themselves, in such absolute silence.

Now at last Mistress Lisle was obliged to open her mouth.

"Will you, please, send the boat away, just far enough to be within sound of my whistle?"

I was not altogether enamoured of the idea. James was a desperate man, and his party, naturally, exasperated at the course of events. If, as I suspected, the other barge was waiting for His Majesty, it was hardly likely that the King would come without a guard of soldiers. With my own men behind me I should be prepared for any emergency. It was quite a different thing to rely solely upon the assistance of Abe Salker, fine fighter although I knew him to be, especially as we should both be encumbered by having to protect Mistress Lisle.

However, my orders were explicit to do exactly as she bade me. The instinct of obedience, from long training and force of habit, was far too strong in me to make me hesitate.

I sent the barge away in the opposite direction to the one in which the King's boat lay. The soldiers were to await us at a distance of a hundred yards. It was clear that Mistress Lisle did not wish for any spectators of the coming meeting.

As soon as the boat had disappeared into the darkness, and the sound of the oars had ceased, showing that the direction I had given had been obeyed, we walked up the slimy stairway to the

wooden stage above. The latter extended for about twenty yards. It was bounded on either side by a wall some eight feet high. The rain had ceased, but the wind was still rough. Coming through the narrow inlet it drove into our faces with considerable force. I offered Mistress Lisle my arm to assist her in battling against it. She, however, did not accept my help, but drew a lanthorn from under her cloak. It was lighted, but obscured by a revolving shutter, which she now thrust back. By the aid of this light we all three surveyed the place on which we were standing. At the end of the staging were some more steps, similar to the ones by which we had ascended from the river. These terminated in a doorway. The door was shut.

After Mistress Lisle had satisfied herself as to her environment, and that it accorded with the description which had doubtless been given her beforehand she beckoned to us to follow, and turning round took up her stand under the protection of the right hand wall. It was the less windy side of the two. Salker and I followed, and occupied our places on each side of her. Mistress Lisle once more darkened the lanthorn. We stood, and waited.

High up I could see two or three windows of Whitehall picked out by having lights within the rooms. Occasionally I noticed the shadow of people moving about. We must have been waiting for some time, perhaps half an hour—it seemed, a great deal longer—when some clock in the palace boomed out eleven. Hardly was the last stroke finished, than a key was heard to turn in the lock of the door commanding our waiting-place. For the first time

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Mistress Lisle made a little movement. Hitherto she had seemed more like an automaton or a statue than a woman. The tension of her nerves was too great, at this juncture, not to make itself apparent, extraordinary as was her will-power. I felt the reflex action of what she was experiencing.

The door swung back; we could see lights behind it. I loosened my sword in its scabbard. Mistress Lisle laid her hand on my arm.

"Do not make a noise," she said, "or he will turn back. The Prince does not wish him stopped on any account."

"I understand," I replied under my breath.

A muffled figure came down the stairs, bearing a lanthorn in his hand. Then some one else followed, to whom the first comer turned deferentially, from time to time, to see that he did not slip on the steps. The second man was heavily cloaked, like the first. I had no doubt, of course, that he was the King. At the rear again were some half a dozen others. These, too, were lighted with a couple of lanthorns. The door closed behind them.

I could not tell what my companion was feeling, but I myself was overpowered by a deep sense of sympathy and compassion. It was a pathetic enough thought that the King of England should be stealing away by night from his own palace, seeking to find a refuge and a place of safety in a land other than his own; oppressed by the sense of what he had lost; filled with gloomy prognostications as to the future. To see is to realise. These thoughts would never have come to me if I had not watched that little procession coming towards me in

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the dim light, leaving Whitehall behind it, while the wind moaned a dirge of regret and farewell. All thought of my own safety or risk had departed ; no one could feel that any one stood in the slightest danger from this bowed, dejected, ruined man.

The procession followed the same order until they came opposite to our waiting-place. Then Mistress Lisle, disclosing the light of the lanthorn she carried, stepped forward. Neither Salker nor I moved. We were hidden in the darkness. She alone owed in the light when she advanced. The rays of her own lanthorn, and of the one carried by the leader, conducting the King, mingled.

The procession stopped. More than one of the King's following uttered an exclamation, or an oath. James stepped back, as if he would seek shelter in flight. Mistress Lisle pushed back her hood from her face and, advancing, confronted the King. Seeing that it was a woman, apparently alone, the men forming the escort made no movement. They perhaps thought that it was some devoted adherent of His Majesty, who, having an inkling of what was happening, had come to say farewell.

Then an extraordinary thing happened. James sank down on his knees, and covered his face with his hands. It seemed as if he was praying. Not a single person present but was filled with marvel at this inexplicable sight ; there on the damp steps, his face hidden, his back bowed, knelt the King !

Only afterwards did I understand the inner meaning of this episode. His Majesty, steeped in superstition, at this moment tried to the uttermost by what he was enduring, had lost his mental balance.

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Many years before this, when James was little more than a youth, Lady Alice Lisle, the wife of one of His Majesty's judges, years younger than her husband, was a favourite at Court. The present King had danced with her on many occasions. The memory of all this had not prevented his sending the gracious lady to her doom. From portraits which I saw later there was not a little resemblance between the Lady Lisle of those days at Court and Mistress Dorothy Lisle of the period about which I am now writing. James had forgotten the lapse of time; the hood thrown back from Mistress Lisle's face, and still shrouding it, gave her the appearance of an age other than her own. For the moment His Majesty had forgotten Dorothy, and remembered only Alice. He thought that she had come back to him from the dead, at the moment of his supreme misery and downfall.

Whether Mistress Lisle understood or not what was passing in the dark recesses of the King's soul I cannot tell. My impression is that she did; at any rate she waited, while the air was filled with such a sense of awe and mystery as I certainly have never experienced before or since. Then she stretched out her hand and touched the kneeling form on the shoulder.

"Rise, sire," she said; "God has doubtless heard your prayer."

Whether she intended to say more I know not. In all probability the words she had designed to speak in the hearing of the King had been brushed away by the strange happening, which she could never have anticipated. At any rate, not a word

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more was said. Mistress Lisle closed her lanthorn and came back to us at the wall. The procession hesitated for a moment, and then passed on down to the river.

The king's barge drew up to the steps ; there was the sound of oars coming, then going. When we could distinguish them no more Mistress Lisle took my arm, and together we walked down to the landing. I could tell by the way that she leant upon me how great was her woman's weakness, now that the need for courage and strength no longer sustained her. I could not doubt that she, too, had been touched by that pathetic, hopeless figure kneeling on the landing-stage.

God had forgiven the King. Mistress Dorothy Lisle had forgiven him too.

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## CHAPTER XXIX

### IN THE ABBEY

IT was Easter Tuesday in the year 1689. William and Mary had been proclaimed King and Queen on the previous Ash Wednesday. The choir of the great Abbey Church of Westminster was filled with a throng of gaily dressed men and women of the highest ranks in the social world. I was standing near the altar rails, and turning round for a moment looked over that assemblage. Near me was Lord Godfrey Latour. Next to him stood Count Cornelius Zulestein, with his uncle William's cousin and confidential servant at his elbow. Near again, in a little group, were Lord Churchill, now Earl of Marlborough, the Earl of Cawston, Lord Cranworth, Colonel Fitzroy Allayne, the Duke of Grafton, Marshal Schomberg, the Duke of Ormond, Lord Mordaunt, and several others. Facing us on the other side were the Countess of Cawston, Lady Cranworth, Sarah Countess of Marlborough, the Princess of Denmark, the Duchess of Devonshire, and my own two sisters.

It seemed to me that I was in a dream, that the abbey, into which the sun's rays were pouring through the stained-glass windows, must be a mirage

of the imagination. I could hardly bring myself to realise that this company was assembled for the purpose, and in honour of the persons, it purported to be.

There was a rustle of silks and satins, an indescribable movement of expectancy and interest, on the part of the congregation. Two brides came in long sweeping robes, the latter held up by tiny pages, up the aisle of the choir. Each in her own style looked wonderfully beautiful, and the effect was all the greater that they contrasted so much with each other. One was the Lady Lettice Latour, the other Mistress Dorothy Lisle.

Within the altar rails stood Bishop Burnet, now clad in his full episcopal robes, no longer booted and spurred as when I had seen him at the Lamb, in Salisbury. Near him were the Dean, and two of the canons of the abbey. The brides ranged themselves opposite to Count Cornelius Zulestein. Still the company waited.

Then there came on the air a fanfare of trumpets. The Bishop, the Dean, and other clergy formed themselves into line. The white-robed choristers stepped out of their places. The procession advanced to the entrance of the abbey. Soon I saw it returning. The King and Queen were being escorted to the kneeling-stools specially provided for their use.

Then the ceremony proceeded. I answered to my part, and I heard the Lady Lettice responding in low, clear tones. The voices, too, of Count Cornelius Zulestein and Dorothy Lisle reached my ears, yet the sense of being an actor in a dream, which must

have a speedy awakening, was upon me throughout. It was not until the service was concluded, and, with Lady Lettice's soft hand on my arm, we had bowed to their Majesties, that I could believe it was all true.

The Earl and Countess of Marlborough entertained all their guests, after the ceremony, in the official house attaching to the Controller of the Household. The healths of both brides and grooms were drunk enthusiastically. The Count and I made response more or less suitable to the occasion. Later, Lettice and I left in the great coach for Etherington Manor, which was henceforward to be our home. Lettice's brother, Lord Godfrey, was to succeed me as equerry to the Earl of Marlborough. My days of fighting were over. The love I felt for my wife and the home life we were to have together were to take the place of the service and ambitions which had filled my mind ere this.

For the first half-hour as we rode side by side, her hand in mine, hardly a word was said.

Then Lettice glanced at me half shyly, half roguishly.

"I cannot think what you were looking at," she said.

"When?" I asked.

"That time when you brought the Countess to Salisbury."

"What Countess?" I replied.

"Stupid," she exclaimed.

"You promised to love, honour, and obey." I laid an emphatic stress on the second word.

"Did I? I had almost forgotten. Well, when you brought Mistress Lisle to Salisbury."

"I was looking at the road. We were in danger all the way; it was my duty to look at the road."

"And you did your duty," she asked.

"Certainly," I answered.

There was a long pause, during which Lettice seemed to put on her considering-cap. Then she said:

"Ah! after all, there are different styles of beauty."

"I admire but one."

She kissed me, a little as if forgiving me something; yet I was not conscious of having done or said anything wrong.

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