

JOHN BLOUNDELLE-BURTON

THE SWORD OF GIDEON

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CHAPTER I

To north and south and east and west horsemen were spurring fast on the evening of May 15th, 1702 (N.S.), while, as they rode through hamlets and villages, they heard behind them the bells of the churches beginning to ring many a joyous peal. Also, on looking back over their shoulders, they saw that already bonfires were being lit, and observed the smoke from them curling up into the soft evening air of the springtime.

For these splashed and muddy couriers had called out as they passed through the main streets of the villages that the long expected war with France was declared at last by England, by Austria-or Germany, as Austria was then called-and the States-General of the United Netherlands.

Wherefore, it was no wonder that the bonfires were instantly set blazing and the bells ringing, since now, all said to the others, the great, splendid tyrant who for sixty years had given orders from his throne for battles, for spoliation and aggrandisement, for the humbling of all other countries beneath the heel of France, would meet his match. He-he! this superb arbiter of others' fate, who had in his younger days been called *Le Dieudonné* and in his older *Le Roi Soleil*-he who had driven forth from their homes countless Protestants and had cruelly entreated those who had remained by their hearths, while desiring only to worship God in their own way and without molestation, must surely be beaten down at last.

"And-'tis good news! – Corporal John goes, they say," exclaimed several of these horsemen as they drew bridle now and again at some village inn, "as Captain-General of all Her Majesty's forces and chief in command of the allied armies. He has been there before and hates Louis; Louis who, although he gave him command of his English regiment, would not give him command of a French one when he would have served France. Let us see how he will serve *him* now."

"I pity his generals and his armies when my lord the Earl of Marlborough crushes them between his ranks of steel," said one who stood by; "the more so that Lewis" – as they called him in this country-"has insulted us by espousing the claims of James's son, by acknowledging him as King of England. He acknowledges him who is barred for ever from our throne by the Act of Succession, and also because his father forswore the oath he took in the Abbey."

"He acknowledges the babe who, as I did hear Bishop Burnet say in Salisbury Cathedral," a Wiltshire rustic remarked, "was no child at all of the Queen, but brought into the palace in a warming pan, so that an heir should not be wanting."

"He persecutes all of our faith," a grave and reverend clergyman remarked now; "a faith that has never harmed him; that, in truth, has provided him with many faithful subjects who have served him loyally. And now he seeks to grasp another mighty country in his own hands, another great stronghold of Papistry-Spain. And wrongfully seeks, since, long ago, he renounced all claims to the Spanish throne for himself and his."

A thousand such talks as this were taking place on that night of May 15th as gradually the horsemen rode farther and farther away from the capital; the horsemen who, in many cases, were themselves soldiers, or had been so. For they carried orders to commanders of regiments, to Lord-Lieutenants, to mayors of country towns, and, in some cases, to admirals and sea captains, bidding all put themselves and those under them in readiness for immediate war service. Orders to the admirals and captains to have their ships ready for sailing at a moment's notice; to the commanders of regiments to stop all furlough and summon back every man who was absent; to the Lord-Lieutenants to warn the country gentlemen and the yeomanry. Orders, also, to the mayors to see to the militia-the oldest

of all our English forces, the army of our freemen and our State-being called together to protect the country during the absence of a large part of the regular troops. Beside all of which, these couriers carried orders for food and forage to be provided at the great agricultural centres; for horses to be purchased in large quantities; for, indeed, every precaution to be taken and no necessary omitted which should contribute towards the chance of our destroying at last the power of the man who had for so long held the destiny of countless thousands in his hand.

Meanwhile, as all the bells of London were still ringing as they had been ringing from before midday, a young man was riding through the roads that lay by the side of the Thames, on the Middlesex side of it. A young man, well-built and as good-looking as a man should be; his eyes grey, his features good, his hair long and dark, as was plainly to be seen since he wore no wig. One well-apparelled, too, in a dark, blue cloth coat passementé with silver lace, and having long riding-boots reaching above his knees, long mousquetaire riding-gloves to his elbows, and, in his three-cornered hat, the white cockade.

He passed now the old church at Chelsea on the river's brink, and smiled softly to himself at the *tintamarre* made by the bells, while, as he drew rein the better to guide his horse betwixt the old waterside houses and all the confusion of wherries and cordage that lumbered the road, or, rather, the rutty passage, he said to himself:

"The torch is lighted. At last! 'Tis a grand day for England. And, though I say it not selfishly, for me. Oh!" he went on, as now his left hand fell gently to the hilt of his sword and played lovingly with its curled quillon; "if I may draw you once again for England and the Queen, and for all you represent for us," glancing at the old church, wherein lay the bodies of such men as Sir Thomas More, who, in his self-written epitaph, described himself in the bitterness wrung from his heart as "*hereticisque*" John Larke, an old rector of Chelsea, executed at Tyburn for his Protestantism; and many other staunch reformers. "Ah, yes," he continued, "if I may draw you against Spain and her hateful Inquisition, against France and the tyrant who persecutes all who love the faith you testify to; if I may but once more get back to where I stood before, then at last shall I be happy. Ah, well! I pray God it may be so. Let me see what cousin Mordaunt can do."

He was free now of the encumbered road betwixt the river and the old houses: the way before him lay through open fields in some of which there grew a vast profusion of many kinds of vegetables and orchard fruits, while, in others, the lavender scented all the afternoon air; whereupon, putting his horse to the canter, he rode on until he came to an open common and, next, to a kind of village green—a green on two sides of which were antique houses of substance, and in which was a pond where ducks disported themselves.

On the east side of the green, facing the pond, there stood embowered in trees an old mansion, known as the Villa Carey. In after days, when this old house had given place to a new one, the latter became known as Peterborough House, doubtless to perpetuate the memory of the dauntless and intrepid man who now inhabited it.

Arrived at the old, weather-beaten oak gate, against which the storms that the southwesterly gales brought up had beaten for more than two centuries, the young man summoned forth an aged woman and, on her arrival, asked if Lord Peterborough were within.

"Ay, ay," the old rosy-cheeked lodge-keeper murmured; "and so in truth he is. And to you always, Master Bracton. Always, always. Yet what brings you here? Is't anything to do with the pother the bells are making at Fulham and Putney and all around? And what is it all about?"

"You do not know? You have not heard?" Bevill Bracton answered, as he asked questions that were almost answers. "You have not heard, even though my lord is at home. For sure he knows, at least."

"If he knows he has said nothing-leastways to me. After midday he sat beneath the great tulip tree, with maps and charts on the carpet spread at his feet above the grass, and twice he has sent off messengers to Whitehall and once to Kensington, but still none come anigh us in this quiet spot.

But, Master Bevill," the old woman went on, laying a knotted finger on the young man's arm-she had known him from boyhood-"those two or three who have passed by say that great things are a brewing-that we are going to war again as we went in the late King's reign, and with France as ever; and that-and that-the bells are all a-ringing because 'tis so."

"And so it is, good dame Sumner. We are going to see if we cannot at least check the King of France, who seeks now to make Spain a second half of France. But come; we must not trifle with time. Let me hook my bridle rein here, and you may give my horse a drink of water when he is cool, and tell me where my lord is now. Great deeds are afoot!"

"He is in the long room now. There shall you find him. Ay, lord! what will he be doing now that war is in the air again? He who is never still and in a dozen different cities and countries in a month."

With a laugh at the old woman's reflections on her master's habits-which reflections were true enough-Bevill Bracton went on towards the house itself and, entering it by the great front door, crossed a stone-flagged hall, and so reached a polished walnut-wood door that faced the one at the entrance. Arrived at it, he tapped with his knuckle on the panel, and a moment later heard a voice from inside call out:

"Who's there?"

"'Tis I-Bevill."

"Ha!" the voice called out again, though not before it had bidden the young man come in, "and so I would have sworn it was. Why, Bevill," the occupant of the room exclaimed, as now the young man stood before him, and when the two had exchanged handshakes, "I expected you hours before. When first the news came to me this morning-

"Your lordship knows?"

"Know? Why, i' faith, of course I know. Is there anything Charles Mordaunt does not know when mischief is in the wind? – Mordanto, as Swift calls me; Sir Tristram, as others describe me; I, whose 'birth was under Venus, Mercury, and Mars,' and who, like those planets, am ever wandering and unfixed. Be sure I know it. As, also, I knew you would come. Yet, kinsman, one thing I do not know-that one thing being, what it is you expect to gain by coming, unless it is the hope of finding the chance to see those Catholics, amongst whom you lived as a youth, beaten down by sturdy Protestants like yourself."

"For that, and to be in the fray. To help in the good cause-the cause we love and venerate. Through you. By you-a kinsman, as you say."

"You to be in the fray-and by me? Yet how is that to be? You are-"

"Ah, yes! I know well. A broken soldier-one at odds with fortune. Yet-"

"Yet?"

"Not disgraced. Not that-never that, God be thanked."

"I say so, too. But still broken, though never disgraced. What you did you did well. That fellow, that Dutchman, that Colonel Sparmann, whom you ran through from breast to back-he may thank his lucky stars your spadron was an inch to the left of his heart-deserved his fate."

"He insulted England," Bracton exclaimed. "He said that without King William to teach us the art of war we knew not how to combat our enemies. For that I challenged him, and ran him through. Pity 'twas I did not-"

"Nay; disable thine enemy-there is no need to kill him. All the same," Lord Peterborough continued drily, "King William broke you for challenging and almost killing a superior officer."

"King William is dead. Death pays all debts."

"I would it did! There are a-many who will not forgive me when I am dead."

"Queen Anne reigns, the Earl of Marlborough is at the head of the army. My lord, I want employment; I want to be in this campaign. Oh, cousin Mordaunt," Bevill Bracton said, with a break in his voice, "you cannot know how I desire to be a soldier once again, and fighting for my religion, my country, and the Queen. To be moving, to be a living man-not an idler. I have never parted with

this," and he touched the hilt of the sword by his side, "help me; give me the right; find me the way to draw it once more as a soldier."

"How to find the way! There's the rub. Marlborough and I are none too much of cater-cousins now. We do not saddle our horses together. And he is-will be-supreme. If you would get a fresh guidon you had best apply to him."

"Even though I may have no guidon nor have any commission, still there will surely be volunteers, and I may go as one."

"There will be volunteers," Lord Peterborough said, still drily, "and I, too, shall go as one."

"You!"

"Yes, I. Only it will be later. When," and he smiled his caustic smile, "the others are in trouble. If Marlborough, if Athlone, or Ormond, who goes too, finds things going criss-cross and contrary, then 'twill be the stormy petrel, Mordaunt, who will be looked to."

"But when-when?" Bevill Bracton asked eagerly.

"When they have had time to flounder in the mire; when Ginkell-I mean my Lord Athlone-has, good honest Dutchman as he is, fuddled himself with his continual schnapps drinking; or when Jack Churchill, sweet as his temper is and well under control, can bear no more contradictions and cavillings from his brother commanders. Then-then Charles Mordaunt will be looked to again; then-for I can cast my own horoscope as well as any hag can do it for me-I shall be invited to put my hand in my pocket, to stake my life on some almost impossible venture, to give them the advice that, when I attempt to offer it, they never care to take."

"But-but," Bevill said, "the time! The time!"

"'Twill come. Only you are young, impatient, hot-headed. I am almost old, yet I am the same sometimes-but you will not wait. What's to do, therefore?"

"I cannot think nor dream-oh, that I could!"

"Then listen to me. 'Tis not the way of the world to do so until it is too late; in your case you may be willing. Do you know Marlborough?"

"As the subaltern knows the general, not being known by him. But no more."

"'Tis pity. Yet-yet if you could bring yourself before his notice; if-if-you could do something that should come under his eyes-some deed of daring-"

"I must be there to do it-not here. At St. James's or Whitehall I can do nought. The watch can do as much as I."

"That's very true; you must be there. There! there! Let me see for it. Where are the charts?" and Lord Peterborough went towards a great table near the window, which was all littered with maps and plans that made the whole heterogeneous mass look more like a battlefield itself after a battle than aught else.

"Bah!" his lordship went on, picking up first a plan and then a chart, and throwing them down again. "Catalonia, Madrid, Barcelona, Cadiz. No good! no good! Marlborough will not be there. The war may roll, must roll, towards Spain, yet 'tis not in Spain that he will be. But Holland-Brabant-Flanders. Ha!" he cried at the two latter names. "Brabant-Flanders. And-why did I not think of it? – she is there, and there's the chance, and-and, fool that I am! for the moment I had forgotten it."

"*She!* The chance! Brabant! Flanders!" Bevill Bracton repeated, the words stumbling over each other in his excitement. "She! Who? And what have I to do with women-with any woman? I, who wish to do all a man may do in the eyes of men?"

"Sit down," Lord Peterborough said now, in a marvellously calm, a suddenly calm, voice. "Sit down. I had forgotten my manners when I failed to ask you to do so earlier."

"Ah, cousin Mordaunt, no matter for the manners at such a moment as this. Alas! you set my blood on fire when you speak of where the war will be, of where it must be, and then-then-you pour a douche of chill cold water over me by talking of women-of a woman."

"Do I so, indeed? Well, hearken unto me," and his lordship leant forward impressively and looked into the young man's eyes. "Hearken, I say. This woman of whom I speak may be the guiding star that shall light you along the path that leads to Marlborough, and all that he can do for you. This woman, who may, in very truth, be your own guiding star or-"

"Or?"

"She may lead to your undoing. Listen again."

CHAPTER II

Had there been any onlooker or any listener at that interview now taking place in the old house at Parson's Green, either the eyes of the one or the ears of the other could not have failed to be impressed by what they saw or heard.

Above all, no observer could have failed to be impressed by the character of the elder man, Charles Mordaunt, Earl of Peterborough and Monmouth, who, although so outwardly calm, was in truth all fire within.

For this man, who was now forty-seven years of age, had led-and was still to lead for another thirty years-a life more wild and stirring than are the dreams of ordinary men. As a boy he had seen service at sea against the Tripoli corsairs, he had next fought at Tangiers, and, on the death of Charles II., had been the most violent antagonist of the Papist King James. An exile next in Holland, he had proposed to the Prince of Orange the very scheme which, when eventually adopted, placed that ungracious personage on the English throne, yet, at the time, he had received nothing but snubs for his pains. He had, after this, escaped shipwreck by a miracle, and, later, lay a political prisoner in the Tower, from which he emerged to become not long afterwards Governor of Jamaica. In days still to come he was to capture Barcelona by a scheme which his allies considered to be, when it was first proposed to them, the dream of a maniac; he was to rescue beautiful duchesses and interesting nuns and other *religieuses* from the violence of the people, to be then sent back to England as a man haunted by chimeras, next to be given the command of a regiment, to be made a Knight of the Garter, and to be appointed an Ambassador. Nor was this all. He flew from capital to capital as other men made trips from Middlesex to Surrey; one of his principal amusements was planting the seeds and pruning the trees in his garden with his own hands; he would buy his own provisions and cook them himself in his beautiful villa, and he was for many years married to a young and lovely wife, who had been a public singer, and whom he never acknowledged until his death was close at hand.

As still Lord Peterborough foraged among the mass of papers on the table, turning over one after the other, and sometimes half a dozen together, Bevill Bracton recognised that he was seeking for some particular scroll or document amidst the confused heap.

"What is it, my lord?" the young man asked. "Can I assist you?"

"Nay. If I cannot find what I want for myself, 'tis very certain none can do it for me. Ah!" he suddenly exclaimed, pouncing down like an eagle on a large, square piece of paper which was undoubtedly a letter. "Ah! here 'tis. A letter from the woman who is to give you your chance."

"I protest I do not comprehend-

"You will do so in time. Bevill," his lordship went on, "do you remember some ten years ago, before you got your colours in the Cuirassiers and, consequently, before you lost them, a little child who played about out there?" and the Earl's eyes were directed towards the great tulip tree on the lawn.

"Why, yes, in very truth I do. I played with her oft, though being several years older than she. A child with large, grey eyes fringed with dark lashes; a girl who promised to be more than ordinary tall some day; one well-favoured too. I do recall her very well. She was the child of a friend of yours, and her name was-was-Sophia, was it now? – or Susan? Or-

"Neither; her name was Sylvia, and is so still-Sylvia Thorne."

"Sylvia Thorne-ay, that is it. She promised to become passing fair."

"She is passing fair-or was, when I saw her last, two years ago. She is not vastly altered if I may judge by this," and Lord Peterborough went to a cabinet standing by one of the windows and, after opening a drawer, came back holding in his hand a miniature.

"Regard her," he said to Bracton, as he handed him the miniature; "learn to know what Sylvia Thorne is like. Learn to know the form and features of the woman who may lead to restoring you to all you would have, or-you are brave, so I may say it-send you to your doom."

"Why," Bracton exclaimed while looking at the miniature and, in actual fact, scarce hearing Lord Peterborough's words, so occupied was he, "she is beautiful. Tall, stately, queen-like, lovely. Can that little child have grown to this in ten years?"

In absolute fact the encomiums the young man passed upon the form and features that met his eye were well deserved.

The miniature, a large one, displayed a full, or almost full length portrait of a young woman of striking beauty. It depicted a young woman whose head was not yet disfigured by any wig, so that the dark chestnut hair, in which there was now and again a glint of that ruddy gold such as the old Venetians loved to paint, waved free and unconfined above her forehead. And the eyes were as Bevill Bracton recalled them, grey, and shrouded with long dark lashes. Only, now, they were the eyes of a woman, or one who was close on the threshold of womanhood, and not those of a little child; while a straight, small nose and a small mouth on which there lurked a smile that had in it something of gravity, if not of sadness, completed the picture. As for her form, she was indeed "more than common tall," and, since there was no suspicion of hoop beneath the rich black velvet dress she wore, Bracton supposed that it was donned for some ball or festival.

"She is beautiful!" he exclaimed again. "Beautiful!"

"Ay, and good and true," Lord Peterborough said. "Look deep into those eyes and see if any lie is hidden therein; look on those lips and ponder if they are highroads through which falsehood is like to pass."

"It is impossible. If the eyes are the windows of the soul, as poets say, then truth, and naught but truth, shelters behind them. And this is Sylvia Thorne But still-still-I do not comprehend. How shall she bring me before my Lord Marlborough? How advance my hopes and desires? Stands she so high that she has power with him?"

"She is a prisoner of France."

"What? She, this beautiful girl, she a prisoner of France, of chivalrous France, for chivalrous France is, though our eternal foe?"

"Yes, in company with some thousands of others, mostly Walloons-muddy Hollanders all-and mighty few English, if any. She is shut up in Liège, and the whole bishopric of Liège is in the hands of France under the command of De Boufflers."

"What does she there-she, this handsome English girl, in a town of Flanders now possessed by the French-she whom, I take it, since now I begin to comprehend-and very well I do! – I am to rescue?"

"One question is best answered at a time. Martin Thorne, her father, was my oldest friend. When James mounted the throne of England he, like your father and myself, was one of those honest adherents of the Stuarts who could not abide the practices James put in motion. He himself had been in exile with Charles and James while Cromwell lived, and he, again like your father, went into exile when James became a Papist."

"My father never returned from abroad," Bevill remarked.

"I know-I know. But Thorne returned only to go abroad again. Your father was, however, well to do. Thorne was not so. When a young exile during Cromwell's rule he had been in Liège, in a great merchant's house, since it was necessary he should find the means whereby to live. When he returned to Liège twenty-six years afterwards he had some means, and he became on this second occasion a merchant himself."

"I begin to understand."

"He thrived exceedingly. 'Tis true England was almost always at war with France, but war is good for commerce. Thorne profited by this state of affairs, and so grew rich. Sylvia is rich now, but the French hold Liège. She would escape from that city."

"Will they not let her go? She is a woman. What harm can she do either by going or staying?"

"They will let none go now who are strangers. Ere long this war, which the claims of Louis to the Spanish succession on behalf of his grandson have aroused, will have two principal seats-Flanders and Spain. There are such things as hostages; there are such things as rich people buying their liberty dearly. And Sylvia is rich, and they know it. Much of her wealth is placed in England, 'tis true, but much also is there, in Liège. Short of one chance, the chance that, in the course of this campaign Liège should fall into the hands of one of our allies, she may have to remain there until peace is made-and that will not be yet. Not for months-perhaps years."

"But if she should escape-what of her wealth then?"

"She will be free, and still she will be rich; while if, as I say, Liège falls into the allies' hands she will not even lose her property there. But, at the moment, she desires only one thing; and that desire, being a rich woman, she is anxious to gratify. She is anxious to return to England."

"And I-I am to be the man to help her to do so-to aid her to escape from Liège. I'll do it if 'tis to be done."

"Well spoken; especially those last words. 'If 'tis to be done.' Yet pause-reflect."

"I have reflected."

Though, however, Bevill had said, "I have reflected," it would scarcely seem as if Lord Peterborough placed much confidence in his statement, since, either ignoring what his young kinsman had said or regarding his words as of little worth, he now proceeded to tell the latter what difficulties, what dangers, would lie in his path.

"I would not send you to that which may, in truth, lead to your doom without giving you fair warning of what lies before you," his lordship commenced, while, as he spoke, his eyes were fixed on Bevill Bracton-fixed thus, perhaps, because he who, in this world, had never been known to flinch at or fear aught, was now anxious to see if the solemn speech he had just uttered could cause the other to blench. Observing, however, that, far from such being the case, Bracton simply received that speech with an indifferent smile, Peterborough went on.

"From the very instant you set foot on foreign ground, every step your feet take will be environed with difficulty and danger. For, since you could by no possibility go as an Englishman, it follows that you must be a Frenchman."

"Am I not already half a Frenchman?" the young man asked. "From the day my father took me to France until I got my colours, I spoke, I read-almost thought-in French. I learnt my lessons in French; I had French comrades, as every follower of the Stuarts had, since we were welcome enough in France; I was French in everything except my religion and my heart. They were always English."

"Therefore," Lord Peterborough continued, for all the world as though Bracton had not interrupted him or uttered one word, "if you, passing as a Frenchman, fell into the hands of the French and were discovered to be an Englishman, your shrift would be short."

"I shall never be discovered."

"While," his lordship continued imperturbably, "if the English, or the Dutch, or the Austrians, or the Hanoverians, or the troops of Hesse-Cassel-for all are in this Grand Alliance, as well as the Prussians and the Danes, who do not count for much, though even they will be powerful enough to string a supposed spy up to the branch of a tree-if any of these get hold of you, thinking you a spy of one or t'other side, well! your life will not be worth many hours' purchase."

"I shall soon prove to the English that I am not a Frenchman, and to the others that I am not a spy. I presume your lordship can provide me with a passport?"

"I can do so, but it will be that of a Frenchman. Bolingbroke, who is now, as you know, Secretary-of-War-oh! la-la! he Secretary-of-War! – has some already prepared. His French hangers-on have provided him with those. All Frenchmen are not loyalists. You will not be the first or only English spy abroad."

"Yet I shall not be a spy."

"Not on the passport, but if you are limed you will be treated as one. I disguise nothing from you."

"And terrify me not at all. As soon as I have that passport I am gone. I shall not return until I bring Mistress Sylvia Thorne with me."

"Fore 'gad, you are a bold fellow! I am proud to have you of my kith and kin. Yet you will want something else. What money have you?"

"I had forgotten that. Money, of course, I have, yet-yet-"

"Not enough. Is that it? Hey? Well, you shall have enough-enough to help you bravely; to bring you, if Providence watches over you, safely to Liége and before the glances of Sylvia's grey eyes. And, then, Heaven grant you may both get back safely."

"I have no fear. What a man may do I will do. Yet, my lord, one thing alone stands not clearly before my eyes. God, He knows, I go willingly enough to obey your behests, your desires; to, if it may be, help a young maiden to quit a town which may soon be ravaged by war; a town to be, perhaps, held by our enemies for months or even years. From my heart I do so. Yet-ah! – how shall I by this do that on which I have set my heart? How get back again to the calling I have loved and forfeited-thought forfeited unjustly? How will this commend me to my Lord Marlborough?"

"What! How? Why, heart alive! if Marlborough but hears you have done such a thing as this, your new commission will be as good as signed by Queen Anne. He hath ever an eye for a quick brain, a ready hand. 'Tis thus that great men rise or, being risen, help to maintain their eminence. The workman who chooses good tools does ever the best of work."

"Therefore I need not fear?"

"Fear! Fear nothing; above all, fear not that you shall go unrewarded. Moreover, remember Jack Churchill has ever been a valiant cavalier of *le beau sexe, un preux chevalier*; remember his devotion to his wife, handsome shrew though she be. Great commander though he is, he is not above advancing those soldiers who can help beauty in distress.

"Now," Lord Peterborough concluded, "go and hold yourself in readiness, remembering always that she whom you go to succour is the child of a man I loved-of my dearest, my dead, friend. Remember, too, that she is young and good and pure and honest. Now go, remembering this; and when I send for you-'twill not be long-return. Then, when you have my last instructions, as also the money and the passport, with, too, a letter for Sylvia Thorne, I will bid you God speed. Go-farewell!"

CHAPTER III

The bilander *Le Grand Roi*, flying French colours, was making her way slowly up the Scheldt to Antwerp, as she had been doing for five hours, namely, from the time she had entered the river. Two days before this time she had left Harwich, while, since the proclamation had been made in London and the principal cities of England that all French and Spanish subjects were to quit the country, and that they would be permitted to depart without molestation and also would not be interfered with while proceeding on the high seas to their destination, she had arrived safely. She was close to Antwerp now; the spire of the cathedral had long since become visible as *Le Grand Roi* passed between the flat, marshy plains that bordered the river; she would be moored, the sailors said, within another hour-moored in Antwerp, which, since the death of Charles II. of Spain, eighteen months before this time, had been seized by the French. For the whole of this region, the whole of Flanders, was now no longer the vast barrier of Western Europe against the power and ambition of the Great King, but was absolutely his own outworks and barrier against his foes.

On board the old-fashioned craft-which had brought away from England Frenchmen and Frenchwomen of all classes, from secretaries of the Embassy and ladies attached to the suite of the ambassadress, down to the croupiers of the faro banks and the women employed by the French milliners in London, as well as a choice collection of French spies who had been earning their living in the capital-all was now excitement. For, ere anyone on board would be permitted to land, their passports would have to be examined, their features, height, and other details of their appearance compared with those passports, and any baggage they might possess would be scrupulously inspected. If all were ashore and housed by the afternoon, or were enabled to set out on their further journey, the sailors told the travellers they might indeed consider themselves lucky.

"Nevertheless," said a young man who sat on the small raised deck on which the wheelhouse stood, while he addressed a young French lady who sat by his side, "it troubles me but very little. So that I reach Louvain in two days, or three, for the matter of that, or even four, I shall be well content."

"Monsieur is not pressed?" this young lady said, after looking at her mother who sat asleep on the other side of her, and then glancing at the young man. And, in truth, the object of her second glance was worthy of observation, since he was good-looking enough to merit scrutiny. His dark features were well set off by his wig, his manly form was none the worse for the gallooned, dark blue travelling coat and deep vest he wore. A handsome young man this, many had said in the last two days on board; a credit to France, the land, as they, told each other often-perhaps because they feared the fact might be overlooked even by themselves-of handsome men and lovely women. Even his *mouches* on the cheeks, his extremely fine lace and his sparkling rings were forgiven by his fellow-passengers, since, after all, were not patches and lace of the best, and jewels, the appanage of a true French gentleman? And a gentleman M. de Belleville was-a gentleman worthy of the greatest country in the universe, they modestly added.

"Not the least in all the world," this graceful, airified young man answered the young lady now in an easy manner; "not the least, I do assure you, mademoiselle. In truth, I am so happy to have left England behind that now I am out of it I care not where else I am."

"Monsieur has seemed happy since he has been on board. He has played with the children, given his arm to the elderly ladies, assisted the older men as they staggered about with the roll of the ship, played cards with the younger. Monsieur will be missed by all when we part at Antwerp."

"But not forgotten, monsieur dares to hope," the graceful M. de Belleville said.

"Agreeable persons are never forgotten," his companion of the moment replied, she being evidently accustomed to the *riposte*. "But, monsieur, this war, this Grand Alliance, as our enemies term it-tell me, it surely cannot last long? This Malbrouck of whom they speak, this fierce English general-he cannot-undoubtedly he cannot-prevail against King Louis' marshals!"

"Impossible, mademoiselle!" the young man exclaimed, while his eyes laughed as he answered. "Impossible! What? Against De Boufflers, Tallard, Villeroy, and the others? Yet there is one thing in his favour, too. He served France once."

"He! This Malbrouck. He! Yet now he fights against her!"

"In truth he did, and so learnt the art of war. He was colonel of the English regiment in the Palatinate under Turenne. That should have taught him something. Also-"

But there came an interruption at this moment. The side of the bilander grated against the great timbers of the dock, the hawsers were thrown out; *Le Grand Roi* had arrived at the end of her journey. A moment later the *douaniers* were swarming into the vessel, hoarse cries were heard, the passengers were ordered to prepare their necessities for inspection, and to have their papers ready.

Among some of the first, though not absolutely one of the first, M. de Belleville was subjected to inspection. His passport was perused by the *douanier*, who mumbled out as he did so, "Height, five feet ten. *Hein!*" raising his eyes to the young man's face. "I should have said an inch more."

"I should have said two more," M. de Belleville replied with a laugh. "*Mais, que voulez vous?*" The monsieur at our embassy would have it so, in spite of my pardonable remonstrances. Therefore five feet ten I have to be. And he was short himself. Let us forgive him."

"Monsieur is gay and debonair. *Bon!* That is the way to live long. Eyes, dark. *Bon!* Hair," putting up a forefinger and lifting M. de Belleville's peruke an inch or so, "dark. *Bon!* Age, twenty-nine."

"Another affront. I assure you, monsieur, I told the gentleman I am but twenty-eight and four months."

"*Ohé!* Monsieur has a light vein. When a man has passed twenty-eight he is twenty-nine in the eyes of the law. Monsieur's vanity need not be offended. Now, monsieur, the pockets. 'Tis but a ceremony, I assure monsieur."

The pockets were soon done with. The man saw a purse through which glistened many pistoles and louis d'or and gold crowns, several bills drawn by the great French banker Bernard, which could be changed almost anywhere, and-a portrait.

"*Hein!*" the man said, though not rudely. "A beautiful young lady. Handsome as monsieur himself, doubtless one whom-"

"Precisely. There is nothing more?"

"Except the baggage."

"I have none. By to-night, or to-morrow, or the next day, I hope to be in Marshal de Boufflers' lines."

"Monsieur must ride then. The Marshal's lines stretch from-"

"I know. I shall reach them as soon as horse can carry me."

After which the young man was permitted to walk ashore.

"So," 'Monsieur de Belleville' said to himself, as now, with his large cloak over his arm, he made his way to the vicinity of the cathedral, "I am here. So far so good. Yet this is but the first step. I must be wary. Vengeance confound the vagabond!" he went on as his thought changed. "I wish he had not looked on that sweet face and stately form of Sylvia Thorne. Almost it seems a sacrilege. Cousin Mordaunt gave me that as my passport to her. I wonder if he dreams of how many times I have gazed on it since I parted from him? Still, it had to be shown."

Consoled with this reflection, the young man continued on his way until the *carillons* sounding above his head told him that the cathedral was close at hand. Then, emerging suddenly from a narrow street full of lofty houses, he found himself on the cathedral *place*, and looked around for some hostelry where he might rest for the day and part of the night.

His first necessity was a horse. This it was important he should obtain at once, directly after he had procured a room and a meal. Yet, he thought, there should be no difficulty in that. The French, who never neglected the art of possessing themselves of the spoils of war, were reported to have laid all the country round under such contributions of food, cattle, forage, and other things, that he had

read in the *Flying Post* ere he left London how, in spite of their large armies scattered over Flanders, they were now selling back at very small prices the things they had plundered.

"But first for an inn," said Bevill Bracton (the *soi-disant* M. de Belleville) to himself. Directing his steps, therefore, across the wide *place* and towards a deep archway, over which was announced the name of an inn, he entered the house and stated that he wanted a room for the night.

"A room?" the surly Dutch landlord repeated, looking up as he heard himself addressed in the French language-doubtless he had good reason to be surly! "A room? Two dollars a night, payable in advance."

"'Tis very well. You do not refuse French money?"

"No, 'specially as we see little enough of it. Hans," addressing a boy in the courtyard after he had received the equivalent of two dollars, "show the French gentleman to No. 89. All food and wine," he added, "is also payable in advance."

"That can also be accomplished. Likewise the price of a horse, if I can purchase one."

"*Ja, ja!* Very well!" the man said, brisking up at this. "If monsieur desires a horse, and will pay for it, I have many from which he may choose."

"So be it; when I descend I will inspect them. Now," to the boy, "show me to the room."

Arrived at No. 89, which, like all Dutch rooms, was scrupulously clean if bare of aught but the most necessary furniture, Bevill, after having made some sort of toilette, and one which would have to suffice until he had bought a haversack and some brushes and other necessities, was ready for his meal.

He went downstairs now to where the surly Dutch landlord still sat in his little bureau, and asked him if the horses were ready for inspection. Receiving, however, the information that two or three had been sent for from some stables that were in another street, he decided to proceed to the long, low room where repasts were partaken of. Before he did so, however, the landlord told him that it was necessary to inscribe his name and calling in a register that was kept of all guests staying at the inn.

Knowing this to be an invariable custom, as it had always been for many long years-for centuries, indeed-on the Continent, Bevill made no demur, but, taking a pen, he dipped it in the inkhorn and wrote down, "André de Belleville, Français, Secrétaire d'Embassade récemment à Londres," since thus ran the passport which had been procured for him by Lord Peterborough.

After which, on the landlord having stated that this information was all that the Lieutenant of Police would require, Bevill proceeded to the room where a meal could be obtained-a meal which, as he had already been warned, he would have to pay for in advance. For now-and it was not to be marvelled at-there was no Dutchman in all Holland who would trust any Frenchman a sol for bite, or sup, or bed.

By the time this repast was finished, the horses from which Bevill was to select one were in the courtyard, and, being informed of this, he went out to see them. One glance from his accustomed eye, the eye of an ex-cuirassier who had followed William of Orange and fought under his command, was enough to show him that any one of them was sufficient for his purpose of reaching Liège by ordinary stages. Therefore the bargain was soon struck, six pistoles¹ being paid for the stoutest of the animals, a strong, good-looking black horse, and the one that seemed as if, at an emergency, it could attain a good speed-an emergency which, Bevill thought, might well occur at any moment on his route through roads and towns bristling with French soldiers.

As, however, the landlord and he returned to the bureau to complete the transaction, Bevill saw, somewhat to his surprise, a man leave the bureau-a man elderly and cadaverous-one who wore a bushy beard that was almost grey, and who looked as though he was far advanced in a decline. A man whose face appeared familiar to Bracton, yet one which, while being thus familiar, did not at first recall to him the moment or place where he had once seen or known him.

¹ The pistole at this period was worth £3 6s. 6d.

"Fore 'gad!" he said to himself. "Where have I seen that fellow?" And Bevill Bracton glanced down the passage as though desiring that the man would return. Not seeing him, however, he stepped back from the gloom of the passage into the sunshine of the courtyard and counted out into his hand the six pistoles he was to pay. Then, as he did so, he heard a step behind him—a step which he imagined to be that of the landlord as he came forth with the receipt, and, looking round, saw that the strange man was now in the bureau, and bending over the register. A moment later he heard him say to the landlord, while speaking in a husky, saddened voice:

"There was no secretary named André de Belleville at the French Embassy. The statement is false. I shall communicate with the Lieutenant of Police at once. I warn you not to let him depart."

Then, in an instant, the man was gone, he passing down the passage and out into the Dutch kitchen garden.

But Bevill had heard enough, had learnt enough.

The voice of the man, added to what he had already seen of him, aided his wandering recollection—it told him who the man was.

"'Tis Sparmann," he said to himself. "Sparmann, who, two years ago, had my sword through him from front to back. It is enough. There is no rest here for me. To-night I must be far from Antwerp. My lord said well. It is death if I am discovered."

CHAPTER IV

The great high road that runs almost in a straight line from Antwerp to Cologne passes through many an ancient town and village, each and all of which have owned the sway of numerous masters. For Spain once had its grip fast on them, as also did Austria, Spain's half-sister; dukes, reigning over the provinces, fierce, cruel, and tyrannical, have sweated the blood from out the pores of the back-bowed peasants; prince-bishops, such as those of Liège and Antwerp and Cologne, have also held all the land in their iron grasp; even the Inquisition once heaped its ferocious brutalities on the dwellers therein. Also, France has sacked the towns and cities of the land, while armies composed of men who drew their existence from English soil have besieged and taken, and then lost and taken again, those very towns and cities and villages.

Among the cities, at this period garrisoned and environed by one of the armies of Louis le Grand, none was more fair and stately than Louvain, though over her now there hangs, as there has hung for two hundred years, an air of desolation. For she who once numbered within her walls a hundred and fifty thousand inhabitants has, since the War of the Spanish Succession, been gradually becoming more and more desolate; her great University, consisting once of forty colleges, exists only in a very inferior degree; where streets full of stately Spanish houses stood are meadows, vineyards, gardens, and orchards now.

But Louvain was still stately, as, at sunset in the latter part of May in the year of our Lord 1702, a horseman drew up at the western *porte* of the city walls, and, hammering on the great storm-beaten gate, clamoured for admission to the city. A horseman mounted on a bright bay-one that had a shifty eye, yet, judging by its lean flanks and thin wiry legs, gave promise of speed and endurance. A rider to whose shoulders fell dark, slightly curling hair, and whose complexion was bronzed and swarthy as though from long exposure to the sun and wind and rain.

"Cease! Cease!" a voice in French growled out from the inner side of the great gate. "Cease, in the name of all the fiends! The gate has had enough blows dealt on it in the centuries that are gone since it first grew a tree. Thy sword hilt will neither do it good nor batter it down. Also, I come. I do but swallow the last mouthful of my supper."

"I do beseech thee, *bon ami*," the traveller called back with a mocking laugh, "not to hurry thyself. My lady can wait thy time. The air is fresh and sweet outside, the wild flowers grow about the gate, and I am by no means whatever pressed. Eat and drink thy fill."

"Um-um!" the voice from inside grunted. "Whoe'er you are, you have a lightsome humour, a jocund tongue. I, too, do love my jest. *Peste!* These sorry Hollanders know not what wit and mirth are-therefore I will open the gate. Ugh! ugh! ugh!"

"Hast choked thyself in thine eager courtesy? Wash it down, man-wash it down with a flask of Rhine wine."

But as the traveller thus jeered the great gate grunted and squeaked on its huge hinges; then slowly, with many more rasping sounds, one half of it opened wide.

"A flask of Rhine wine," muttered the warder, an elderly man clad in a soldierlike-looking dress, and one who looked as if not only the Rhine wines, but those of Burgundy and Bordeaux, were well known to him. "A flask of Rhine wine. Where should I, a poor soldier of the Régiment de Beaume, and a wounded one at that, get flasks of wine?"

"Where? Why, *camarade*, from a friend. From me. Here," and, putting his hand to his vest pocket, the cavalier tossed down a silver crown to the warder.

"Monsieur is an officer," the soldier said, stiffening himself to the salute, while his eye roamed over the points of the bright bay, and observed the handsome, workman-like sword that lay against its flanks, and also the good apparel of the rider. "He calls me *camarade*, and is lavish."

"Aye, an officer. Now, also disabled by a cruel blow. One who is still weak, yet who hopes ere long to draw this again," touching his quillon. "Of the cavalry. Now, see to my papers, and then let me on my way."

"To the lady who awaits monsieur," the man said with a respectful smile.

"Tush! I did but jest. There is no lady fair for me. I ride towards-towards-the Rhine, there to take part against the Hollanders who cluster thick, waiting to join Malbrouck." As the horseman spoke, he drew forth a paper from his pocket, and, bending over his horse's neck, handed it to the man.

"Le Capitaine Le Blond," the latter read out respectfully, "capitaine des Mousquetaires Gris. Travelling to Cologne. Bon, monsieur le capitaine," saluting as he spoke. "Pass, mon capitaine."

"Tell me first a good inn where I may rest for the night."

"There are but two, 'L'Ours' and 'Le Duc de Brabant.' The first, monsieur le capitaine, is the best. The wine is-*o-hé*-superb, adorable. Also it is full of officers. Some mousquetaires are of them. Monsieur should go there. There are none at the other."

"I will," the captain of mousquetaires said aloud as he rode on, though to himself he muttered, "Not I. 'Le Duc de Brabant' will suffice for me."

When Bevill Bracton recognised Sparmann in the inn at Antwerp he knew, as has been told, that he already stood in deadly peril. Already, though he had scarce been ashore two hours! Nevertheless, while he recognised this and understood that at once, without wasting a moment, he must form some plans for quitting Antwerp, and also, if possible, assuming a fresh disguise, he could by no means comprehend the presence of Sparmann in the city. Nor could he conceive what this man, a Dutchman, could have to do with the French Lieutenant of Police, an official who must surely be hated by the townspeople as much as, if not more than, the rest of their conquerors.

Re-entering the passage now, and approaching the bureau with the determination of discovering something in connection with his old enemy, if it were possible to do so, Bevill observed that the landlord's eyes were fixed upon him with a glance that was half menacing and half derisive, while, as he perceived this, he reflected, "Doubtless the man is rejoiced to see one of the hated French, as he supposes me to be, outwitted by his own countryman." After which he addressed the other, saying:

"Who is that man who throws doubt upon my identity and the passport I carry, issued by the French Embassy in London?"

"He! *ach* he! One who is a disgrace to the country that bore him- to this city, for of Antwerp he is. He was once an officer in the Stadtholder's bodyguard, the Stadtholder who was made King of England; yet now he serves the French, your countrymen. Bah!" and the landlord spat on the floor. "Now he is a spy on his own. A-a-a *mouchard*."

"But why? Why?"

"He has been disgraced. He was always in trouble. A soldier-a young one, too; an English officer, as it is said-ran him through for jeering at the English soldiers; then, since he was despised by his own brother-officers for being beaten, he took to drinking. At last, he was broken. Then he joined the French, your countrymen. Only, since he had been beaten by an Englishman, they would not have him for a soldier. So he became *un espion*. For my part, I would that the English officer had slain him. To think of it! A Hollander to serve the French!"

"I fear you do not love the French," Bevill said quietly, a sudden thought, an inspiration, flashing to his brain even as the landlord poured out his contempt on his own compatriot. "The English appear to have your sympathy."

"Does the lamb love the tiger that crushes it between its jaws? Does the hare love the spring in which it is caught? Yet-yet they say," the landlord went on, casting a venomous glance at Bevill, "your country will not triumph over us long. Malbrouck is coming, forty thousand more English soldiers are coming; so, too, are the soldiers of every Protestant country in Europe. Then, look out for yourselves, my French friends."

"So you love the English?"

"We love those who pull us out of the mire. And they have been our allies for years."

For a moment after hearing these words Bevill stood regarding this man while pondering deeply; then, making up his mind at once, he said:

"If I told you that at this present time that young English officer who ran Sparmann through this renegade countryman of yours, this *espion*, this spy of the French, *your conquerors*-stands in imminent deadly danger in Antwerp-here, here, in your own city-would you help and succour him? Would you strive to save him-from Sparmann, the spy?"

"What!" the landlord exclaimed, his fishlike eyes extending as he stared at Bracton. "What!" while in a lower tone he repeated to himself the words Sparmann had uttered a quarter of an hour ago: "There was no secretary named André de Belleville at the French Embassy. The statement is false."

"Aye," replied Bevill Bracton, hearing his muttered words, and understanding them too, since he had learnt some Dutch when in Holland under King William. "Aye, the statement is false, but his is true. There was no secretary of that name. The passport was procured to help that young officer to reach Liège and assist a countrywoman. Also, if the day should haply come, to assist, to join Protestant Holland against Catholic France and Spain."

"And," the man said, still staring at him, "you are he? You are an Englishman-a Protestant?"

"I am, God be praised. I trust in you. It is in your power to help me to escape, or you can give me up to the Lieutenant. It is in your power to enable me to quit Antwerp ere the alarm is given at the gates. If it be already given, my chance is gone! You hate France; you look to England for rescue and preservation. Speak. What will you do?"

"The spy saw," the landlord said, still muttering to himself, "that you had bought the black horse. Therefore you cannot ride that, though it is the best. But in my stable is a bay-"

"Ah!"

"A bay! *Ja wohl*, a bay! Tricky, ill-tempered, but swift as the wind. Once outside the city-"

"Heaven above bless you!"

" – You are safe. You speak French like a Frenchman. You have passed before as one, it seems; you can do so again. The bay belonged to a mousquetaire who died here of a fever when first the accursed French seized on the city. I would not give it up since his bill was large."

"One thing only! My passport will betray, ruin me."

"*Nein*. I have the mousquetaire's papers; his French pass. He was a captain named Le Blond. With those, and with that thing off your head," nodding at the peruke Bevill wore, "you will surely pass the gate. But you must be quick. Quick! Time is money, as you English say. With you it may be more. It may be life or death."

Even as the landlord spoke Bevill had torn off his wig and shaken out his own dark hair, after which the former said:

"I will go get the papers. Then will I saddle the bay myself. She is in the stable in the back of the garden. You can pass out that way and through a back street. If you have luck, you are saved. If not-"

"I *shall* be saved. I know it-feel it. But you-you-he warned you of what might befall-"

"Bah! You will have escaped unknown to me. For proof, I can show that you even left the black horse behind in your haste. How shall they know that I gave you another in its place?" And the landlord left his bureau and ran up the stairs, saying he would be back with the papers of Captain Le Blond ere many moments had passed.

Thus it was that the supposed captain of mousquetaires escaped the first peril he encountered on the road towards Liège, towards assisting Sylvia Thorne to quit that city. He had escaped, yet he had done so by means that were abhorrent to him-by a false passport, the papers of a man now in his grave. He who-Heaven pardon him! – could he have had matters as he desired, would have ridden boldly and openly to every barrier, have faced every soldier of the enemy, and, announcing himself as what he was, have got through or finished his mission almost ere it was begun.

Yet that escape was indeed perilous, and, though Bevill Bracton knew it not, he had, even with the aid of the landlord, only missed discovery by a hair's breadth.

For, but a quarter of an hour before he rode towards the city barrier, the guard had been changed; a troop of the Régiment d'Orléans had relieved a troop of the Mousquetaires Gris. Had Bevill, therefore, arrived before this took place, he would at once have been discovered and his fate sealed, since all would have known that le Capitaine Le Blond had been dead for months. But with the men of the Régiment d'Orléans it was different, since they had but marched in a week or so before, and probably-though it need by no means have been so-knew not the name or appearance of the officers of the mousquetaires.

Bevill soon learnt, however, that Sparmann had wasted no time. Had he not acquired those papers, his undertaking must have ended here. The sergeant at the barrier, who came forward to inspect the paper he presented, carried in his hand another, which he read as Bevill rode up; and the latter divined, by the swift glance the trooper cast at his horse, and divined it with a feeling of actual certainty, that on that paper was a description of the black horse and his own appearance. But the horse was not the same, the peruke was wanting, and his riding cloak hid all that was beneath. Consequently, with a muttered "*Bon voyage, M. le capitaine,*" and a salute, the sergeant stood back as Bevill rode through on the bay mare, who justified the character her recent owner had given her by lashing out with her hind legs and prancing from one side of the road to the other in her endeavour to unseat her rider. Soon finding, however, that she had her master on her back, she settled down into a swinging stride and bore him swiftly along the great, white east road.

And now he was in Louvain, after having passed by numberless implements of warfare collected by the roadside and watched over by French soldiery, as well as having passed also two French regiments marching swiftly towards Antwerp, there to reinforce the garrison, since, as war was declared, none knew how soon the forces of the redoubtable Marlborough, or Malbrouck, as they called him, might appear.

He was in Louvain, riding up an old, quiet street full of Spanish houses with pointed roofs that almost touched those of the opposite side, and allowed only a glimpse of the roseate hue of the early summer sunset to be seen between them. And soon, following the directions given him by the soldier at the gate, he reached the hostelry "*Le Duc de Brabant,*" a house that looked almost as old as Time itself. One that, to each of its numerous windows, had huge projecting balconies of dark discoloured stone, of which the house itself was composed; an old, dark mansion, on whose walls were painted innumerable frescoes, most of which represented sacred subjects but some of which also depicted arrogantly the great deeds and triumphs of the Dukes of Brabant. A house having, too, a huge pointed gateway, the summit of which extended higher than the top of the windows of the first floor, and down one side of which there trailed a coiled rope carved in the stone, while, on the other side, was carved in the same way an axe, a block, and a miniature gibbet.

"Ominous signs for those who enter here," Bevill thought to himself, while the mare's hoofs clattered on the cobblestones as he rode under the archway. "Ominous once in far-off days for those who entered here, if this was some hall of justice, or the residence of their, doubtless, tyrannical rulers. Yet will I not believe that they are ominous for me. I have no superstitions, and, I thank Heaven devoutly, I have no fear. Yet," he muttered to himself as he prepared to dismount, "I would I had not to resort to so many subterfuges. Rather would I be passing for what I should be-a soldier belonging to those who have sworn to break down the power of this great ambitious king, this champion of the bigotry that we despise." Then, in an easier vein he added, as though to console himself, "No matter! What I do I do to help, perhaps to save, a helpless woman; to reinstate myself in the calling I love, the calling from which I was unjustly cast forth. And," he concluded, as he cast the reins to the servitors who had run into the courtyard at the clatter made by the mare's hoofs, "it is war time, and so-à *la guerre, comme à la guerre!*"

CHAPTER V

As Bevill dismounted in the great courtyard, and, addressing a man who was evidently the innkeeper, told him that he desired accommodation for the night, he recognised that, whatever might be the inferiority of this house to its rival, "L'Ours," it had at least some traveller, or travellers, of importance staying in it.

In one corner of the yard, round which ran a railed platform level with the ground floor and having four openings with steps leading up to that floor, there stood, horseless now, a large travelling coach, of the kind which, later, came to be called a *berline*. This construction was a massive one, since inside it were to be seen not only the front and back seats-the latter so deep and vast that one person might have made a bed of it by lying crosswise-but also a small table, which was firmly fixed into the floor in the middle of the vehicle. The body of the coach was slung on to huge leathern braces, which also served as springs, and was a considerable height from the ground-so high, indeed, that the steps outside the doors were four in number, though, when the vehicle was in progress, they were folded into one. On the panels were a count's coronet, a coat-of-arms beneath it, and above it the word and letter "De V." On the roof, and fitted into the grooves constructed for them, were some travelling boxes of black leather, with others piled on top of them. For the rest, there were on each side of the coach, in front, and at the back, long receptacles for musketoons as well as another for a horn, the weapons and instrument being visible.

"A fine carriage," Bevill said to the landlord, who seemed equally as surly and ungracious, if not more so, than the man at Antwerp had been while he supposed that the traveller was a Frenchman. "Some great personage, I should suppose."

"A compatriot of yours," the man said. "*Mein Gott!* Who travels thus in our land but your countrymen-and women? Yet," he added still more morosely, "it may not be ever thus."

Ignoring this remark, which naturally did not arouse Bevill's ire, since he imagined that the state of things the man suggested might most probably come to pass, he exclaimed:

"And women, you say? *Pardie!* Are ladies travelling about during such times as these, when war is in the air?"

"Aye, war is in the air," the landlord said, ignoring the first part of the other's remark. "In the air, and more than in the air. Soon it will be in the land and on the sea." After which, a waiting woman having arrived to conduct Bevill to his room, and a stableman having led the horse to a stall, the man turned away. Yet, as he went, he muttered, "Then we shall see. England and Holland are stronger than France on the sea, and on the land they are as good as France."

It was no part of Bevill's to assume indignation, even if he could have done so successfully, at these contemptuous remarks about his supposed country and countrymen; therefore he followed the woman to the room to which she led him. On this occasion, doubtless because he possessed a horse, and that horse was at the present moment in the landlord's custody, no demand was made for payment in advance.

"And now," he said to himself, "a supper, the purchase of a few necessaries in this town, and to bed. To-morrow I must be off and away again. The sooner I am in Liège the better."

In the old streets of that old city, Bevill found a shop in which he was able to provide himself with the few requisites that travellers carried with them in such distracted times. Amongst the accoutrements of the late Captain Le Blond's charger was his wallet-haversack for fastening behind the cantle, or in front of the pommel; but it required filling, and this was soon done. A change of linen was easily procured, which, with a comb, generally completed a horseman's outfit, and then Bevill set out on his return to "Le Duc de Brabant." But as he passed along the street he came across an armourer's shop, and, glancing into it, was thereby reminded that he was without pistols.

"And," he thought to himself, "good as my blade is, a firearm is no bad accessory to a sword. It may chance, and well it may, that ere I reach Liège, as in God's grace I hope to do, I may have need of such a thing. So be it. Cousin Mordaunt has well replenished my purse; I will enter and see if the armourer has any such toys."

Suiting the action to the thought, Bevill entered the shop, and, seeing an elderly man engaged on polishing up a breastplate, asked him if he had any pistols to dispose of.

"Ja!" the man replied. "And some good ones, too. Only they are dear. Also the mynheer may not like them. Most of them were taken from the French after Namur, and sold to me by an English soldier."

"Bah! What matters how I come by them so that 'tis honestly, and that they will serve their purpose? Produce them."

Upon this the armourer dragged forth a drawer in which were several weapons of the kind, some lying loose and some folded in the leather or buckskin wrappings in which the man had enveloped them. At first, those which met Bevill's eyes did not commend themselves much to him; some were too old, some too clumsy, and some too rusty.

"Mynheer is difficult to please," the armourer remarked with a grunt; "perhaps these will suit him better. Only they are dear," while, as he spoke, he unfolded two of the buckskin wrappers and exhibited a pair of pistols of a totally different nature from the others. These weapons were indeed handsome ones, well mounted on ivory and with long, unbrowned barrels worked with filigree. The triggers sprang easily back and fell equally as easily to the light touch of a finger, the flints flashing sparks bravely as they did so. On one was engraved "*Dernier espoir*," on the other "*Mon meilleur ami*."

"How much for these?" Bevill asked, looking at the armourer.

"Two pistoles, with powder flask and bullet-box. Also the flask well filled and two score balls."

"So be it. They are mine." And Bevill dropped one into each of the great pockets of his riding-coat. "Now for the flask and bullets."

"With these," he said to himself, as he walked back to the inn, "my sword, and the swift heels of the mare, I can give a good account of myself if danger threatens."

The supper for the guests was prepared when he reached "Le Duc de Brabant," and Bevill, taking his place at the table, glanced round to see who his fellow-travellers might be, yet soon observed that, for the present at least, there were none.

"So," he thought to himself, "the fellow at the gate spoke truly. 'Tis very apparent that 'The Duke' is not in such high favour as his rival, 'The Bear.' However, the eating proves the pudding and the drinking proves the wine. Let us see to it."

Whereupon he bade the drawer bring him a flask of good Coindrieux-the list of wines hanging on a wall so that all the guests might see and read. Then, ere the wine came, Bevill commenced to attack the course set before him, though before he had eaten two mouthfuls an interruption occurred.

Preceded by a servitor, whom Bevill supposed-and supposed truly, as he eventually knew-to be a private servant and not one attached to the inn, a lady came down the room towards the table at which the Englishman sat: a lady still young, of about thirty years of age, tall, and delicate-looking. Also she was extremely well favoured, her blue-grey eyes being shielded by long dark lashes, and her features refined and well cut. As for her hair, Bevill, who on her approach had risen from his seat and bowed gravely, and then remained standing till she was seated, could form no opinion, since it was disguised by her wig. But he observed that she was clad all in black, even to her lace; while, thrown over her wig, was the small coif, or hood, which widows wore. Therefore he understood the solemnity of her attire-a solemnity still more enhanced and typified by the look of sadness which her face wore.

This lady, who had returned Bevill's courtesy by a slight inclination of her head, was now served by the elderly manservant, who took the dishes from the ordinary inn server, and, placing each before her who was undoubtedly his mistress, then retired behind her chair until the next dish was ready.

But, as would indeed have been contrary to all etiquette, neither Bevill nor the lady addressed a word to the other.

When, however, the drawer returned with the flask of Coindrieux, and Bevill spoke some word to the man on the subject of not filling his glass too full, he observed for one moment that the lady lifted her eyes and looked at him somewhat curiously, and as though some tone or intonation of his had attracted her attention. A moment later her eyes were dropped to her plate again, though more than once during the serving of the next dish he observed that she was again regarding him.

"Has my accent betrayed me?" Bevill mused. "When I spoke to the man, did she recognise that I am no Frenchman? Has my tongue grown rusty?"

Yet, even as he so pondered, he told himself that there was no reason that such should be the case. The lady might herself be no Frenchwoman, but, instead, one belonging to this war-worn land.

"She may not be capable of judging who or what I am," he reflected.

Yet in another moment he had learnt that her powers of judging whether he was a Frenchman or not were undoubtedly sufficient.

In a voice, an accent, which no other than a Frenchman or Frenchwoman ever possessed, an intonation which none but those who had learnt to lisp that language at their mother's knee could have acquired, the lady spoke now to her elderly servant, saying:

"Ambroise, retire, and bid Jeanne prepare the valises. I have resolved to go forward an hour after dawn."

The manservant bowed, then said:

"But the supper, Madame la Comtesse? Who shall serve, madame? The remainder is not—"

"The server will do very well. Go and commence to assist Jeanne."

"Madame la Comtesse," Bevill thought to himself when the man had departed. "So this is doubtless the owner of the grand coach. And she is a Frenchwoman. It may well be that she understands I am no countryman of hers, though I know not, in solemn truth, why she should suppose I pretend to be one—unless the landlord or servants have told her, or she has looked in the register of guests." For here, as everywhere, all travellers had to give their names to the landlords, and Bevill was now registered as "Le Capitaine Le Blond, of the Mousquetaires Gris."

The supper went on still in silence, however, and the server attended both to the lady who had been styled "La Comtesse" and to Bevill. But he was nothing more than a raw Flemish boor, little accustomed to waiting on ladies and gentlemen, and gave Bevill the idea that he was not occupied in his usual vocations. Once he dropped a dish with such a clatter that the lady started, and once he handed another to Bevill before offering it to the countess.

"Serve madame!" Bevill said sternly, looking at the hobbledohoy and covering him with confusion, while, as he did so, the lady lifted her eyes to him and bowed stiffly, though graciously. Then, as if feeling it necessary that some word of acknowledgment, some small token of his civility, should be testified, the lady said:

"Monsieur is extremely polite. He is doubtless not native here?"

"No, madame. I am a stranger passing through the land on my way towards the Rhine," while, as Bevill spoke, he was glad that, in this case, there was no need for deception, since Liège was truly on the road towards the Rhine.

"As am I. I set out to-morrow for Liège."

"For Liège? Madame will scarcely find that town a pleasant place of sojourn. Yet I do forget—madame is French."

"As is monsieur," the Countess said, with a swift glance at her companion, speaking more as though stating a fact than asking a question.

Bevill shrugged his shoulders ever so slightly, but as much as good breeding would allow. Then he said:

"Monsieur de Boufflers commands there. Madame will be at perfect ease."

"Doubtless," the other said, with a slight shrug on her part now. "Doubtless. Yet," and again she shrugged her shoulders, "war is declared. The English and the Dutch will soon be near these barrier towns. They say that the Earl of Marlborough will come himself in person, that he will command all the armies directed against us. Would it be possible that monsieur should know-that he might by chance have heard-when the Earl will be in this neighbourhood?"

"I know nothing, madame," Bevill replied, while as he did so two thoughts forced themselves into his mind. One was that this lady had discovered easily enough that he was no Frenchman; the other, that she was endeavouring to extract some of the forthcoming movements of the enemy-the enemy of France-from him.

"What is she?" he mused to himself when the conversation had ceased, or, at least, come to a pause. "What? Some spy passing through the land and endeavouring to discover what the English plans may be; some woman who, under an appearance of calm and haughty dignity, seeks for information which she may convey to de Boufflers or Tallard. Yet-how to believe it! Spies look not as she looks; their eyes do not glance into the eyes of those they seek to entrap as hers look into mine when she speaks. It is hard to credit that she should be one, and yet-she is on her road to Liège-Liège that, at present, is in the grasp of France, as so much of all Flanders is now."

Suddenly, however, as still these reflections held the mind of Bevill Bracton, there came another, which seemed to furnish the solution of who and what this self-contained, well-bred woman might chance to be.

"There are," he reflected, "there must be, innumerable officers of high rank at Liège under Marshal de Boufflers; it may be that it is to one of these she goes. Not a husband, since she is widowed; nor a son, since, at her age, that is impossible; but a father, a brother. Heaven only grant that, if she and I both reach that city safely, she may not unfold her doubts of what I am. For doubt me she does, though it may be that she does not suppose I am an Englishman. If she should do so, 'twill be bad for Sylvia Thorne and doubly bad for me."

As Bevill reached this stage in his musings, the Countess rose from the table, and, when he had risen also and hastened to the door to hold it open for her, passed through, after acknowledging his attention and also his politely expressed hope that her journey to Liège would be easily made.

After which, as he still stood at the door until she should have passed the turn made by the great stone staircase, Bevill observed this lady look round at him, though not doing so either curiously or coquettishly. Instead, it appeared to the young man standing there deferentially that the look on her face seemed to testify more of bewilderment, of doubt, than aught else.

"So be it," he said to himself, as now he returned to the room in which they had dined, and proceeded to adjust his sword-sash, which, with the sword itself, had been removed before the meal, and would, in any case, have been at once removed by him from his side on a lady taking her seat at the table. "So be it. Forewarned is forearmed. She misdoubts and mistrusts me. If we should meet again-as meet we surely shall, since we travel the same road and go to the same place-I must be on my guard. Yet, pity 'tis, if she should be a spy. Aye! if she should be. If she should be! Almost it is beyond belief."

He went now towards the stables, to which he had seen the mare led when he arrived. For Bevill had been a good soldier once, and hoped that the day was not far off when he would be so again, and, above all else, travellers such as he was at this time looked to the care and comfort of their beasts. Also, in his ride from Antwerp, he had come to like this tetchy, wayward creature, which, when her tantrums were over, had borne him so well and swiftly on his road. Therefore he went towards her stall now, and noticed that she looked at him over the board of the division and whinnied as she recognised him, while rubbing her soft muzzle against his arm as he stroked and petted her, and, in doing this, he forgot the woman over whom, but a moment before, his mind had been so much exercised.

The woman who, as she had passed up the great stone-carved staircase, had said to herself:

"Who-what is he? Not a countryman of mine, well as he speaks our tongue-aye, marvellously well-and courteous as he is. And neither a Flemish nor a German boor. Is he an Englishman-is he-is he? Ah! if he were only that! Oh! if he were-he who will be in Liége as soon as I-he who will be there when the English forces draw near, as they will surely do."

CHAPTER VI

That night Bevill Bracton slept well, and as he had not slept since he first went on board *Le Grand Roi* at Harwich two days ago. For the vessel had been full of persons, and especially children, who suffered from the sea; the passage had been rough and, consequently, noisy; while, although the wind was favourable for reaching the Dutch coast, it had rendered sleep impossible.

But this night had made amends for all, and Bevill Bracton, springing out of bed as he heard the clock of St. Peter's striking seven, prepared to make himself ready for the day's journey. Overnight, before he had sought sleep, he had thanked Heaven devoutly for having allowed him to penetrate so far as even this old city of Louvain, and into what was, in truth, the enemy's country-by seizure, though not by right. Now once more he prayed that, as he had been thus far favoured, so he might still be.

One thing he observed at once as he threw back the heavy shutters from his windows, which looked down into the great courtyard. He saw that the great travelling coach was gone. The Comtesse, whose title he had learnt from the landlord ere he sought his bed overnight was De Valorme, had departed with any following she might have other than the ancient domestic he had seen at table, and the woman, Jeanne, of whom they had spoken.

"Yet," Bevill said to himself, "at the pace *La Rose*," as he had now named the mare, "can travel as against the speed that heavy lumbering coach can attain, I should pass her ere she has accomplished half the distance to Liège-long before she has reached St. Trond, indeed. And," for still there was in his mind a thought, a fear-engendered doubtless by the dangers with which he must be now surrounded, and would be doubly surrounded as he progressed farther, and when he had entered Liège-that in this woman there might be hidden something that would imperil his safety, "and if she is a spy, at least it is as well I should be there before her. Let me waste no time therefore."

He folded up his haversack and cloak, although, as he could see by the courtyard, which was wet and had little pools of rain lying in the hollows between the old, worn stones, it must have rained during the night or early morning, although it was now a fair, sweet day. The late May sun was shining down fiercely on the red roofs; a thrush was singing blithely in its wicker cage as though rejoicing in the warmth and light; one or two of the heavy, clownish domestics of the inn were making an early meal of black bread and blacker beer at a table below him; all nature smiled.

He descended, therefore, carrying his haversack and cloak, and with his recently purchased pistols thrust in his sash under his coat, since no traveller left such weapons far from his hand when he slept in strange houses, and, going once more to the *Speiseraum*, ordered some breakfast. Then he went out to see that all was well with *La Rose*.

Half an hour later he was on the way to Liège, and was riding along roads that passed through orchards which were now losing all their pink and white blossoms as the fruit slowly developed on the trees.

Because he was young and strong and healthy; because, too, he had great hopes before him, he took a keen delight in all that was around him-in the fresh morning air that he drew into his lungs in great draughts, in the sight of the full-leaved, half blossom and half fruit gardens and orchards, even in the brooks that had been cut by the sides of those orchards in long past days, and through which the water ran with a swishing sound-he was jocund. He felt how good it was to live and to be passing through the land on such a morning as this, to hear the birds singing and twittering, and to see the cattle already seeking shade from the morning sun; to cry out "Good-morning" to the peasants in the fields or "God be with you" to the old people sitting outside their houses, their life's labour done. He felt thus because he was young, and strong, and full of life; because, too, his blood was stirred by the thought of the adventures which must surely lie before him; because almost he felt as though he were some young knight-errant of dead and long-forgotten centuries riding forth to rescue a lady fair who, immured in some gloomy town or fortalice, waited for him with longing, eager eyes.

"And if the miniature does not belie sweet Sylvia Thorne," Bevill murmured to himself as the mare cantered along the white roads which the sun had now dried, "then no knight in armour ever rode in far-off days to the assistance of woman more fair than she. As a child she was winsome. I wonder if this stately woman, whose portrait I have gazed on so of ten since my lord gave it into my charge, is winsome still? Winsome-yes, it may well be so. But grave, almost austere, as those eyes that look out at me whenever I gaze on the portrait proclaim; stately in her bearing, almost cold. Well! Cold let her be. What matters it to me? She is not the guerdon that I seek to win, but only the means by which I shall win the guerdon I would have. Let me but do my best, and all will be very well. Mistress Thorne may freeze me with one glance from those calm eyes, and yet my lord Marlborough shall warm me back to life with his approval."

The day went on, the sun rose high in the cloudless sky, and, except for the various halts which Bevill made under shady trees, or on the cool side of old Lutheran churches and quaint Flemish houses, to rest La Rose-and once to refresh himself-he had wasted no time. So that he knew, not only by the sign-posts and the hamlets he had passed through, but also by a *routier*, or chart of the district, which hung in the dark hall of the "Duc de Brabant," that he must be nearing a small town called St. Trond, a place that lay nearer to Liège than to Louvain.

"Madame de Valorme set out at six, the landlord told me," Bevill reflected, "and I ere the clocks struck eight; I marvel much that I have not come up with her coach yet. Her horses must travel faster than I thought, or that coach be lighter than its appearance warranted."

Then, at this moment, there came an interruption to any further meditations on his part.

A shot rang out on the clear noontide air, one that caused the nervous, excitable mare to swerve and spring across the road, almost unseating Bevill; and then, while he recovered himself, to gallop wildly along the white straight road bordered by pollard trees.

"Gently, gently," Bevill exclaimed, as he endeavoured to soothe her, while, since he was a finished horseman, he knew better than to attempt to check her suddenly, but drew her up gradually. "Gently. Though, 'fore Heaven, that sudden report was enough to startle one less flighty than she. Whence," he mused, "did that shot proceed? To my left, surely, and from a side road which I passed a moment ere the report rang forth. Was," with a dark look on his face, "the ball intended for me? Well, we will see to it."

Whereupon, since now La Rose was, by the aid of much stroking of her neck and patting and soothing, restored somewhat to calmness, Bevill turned her head round in the direction they had come, and at last persuaded her, though it was not easy to do, to retrace her steps to the crossroads.

Also, he opened the covers of his holsters and threw them back, so that the butt of each of his new pistols should be ready to his hand.

"I may be indebted for a favour to some marauder," he muttered, "and I abhor debt. If I owe one, it shall be repaid in full." After which he loosened his sword in its sheath, and so reached the crossroads.

As he turned into it he saw nothing at first, unless it was the ominous twitching of the mare's ears; but a moment later he heard a voice, and that a woman's-a voice that exclaimed:

"You cowardly dastards! You-you Flemish boors! To attack a woman-to slay an old man!"

"Great powers!" exclaimed Bevill to himself, as now a touch of his knee sent La Rose forward swiftly, while at the same time he drew forth the pistol from the right holster. "'To slay an old man.' And that voice hers. Hers!"

"French! French! French!" he heard several voices exclaim together in the raucous, guttural, Low Frankish dialect of the district. "You are all French Papists, servants of the great Papist King in Paris, of the Italian Priest in Rome. We will not spare you. Or," one voice said, "not your wealth, if we spare your lives. And he, this dead one, should not have resisted us."

Whatever the ruffians who thus spoke might have intended doing was now, however, doomed to be frustrated. Bevill Bracton was amongst them-a party of seven men, armed some with great

horse pistols, one or two with reaping hooks, and another with a rusty sword. In a moment they were, however, scattered, the mare knocking down two as she lashed out, while one received a bullet in the shoulder from Bevill, and, falling to the ground, vowed that he was dead.

But amidst the confusion, and while Bevill cried, "Stop, all of you. He who attempts to fly shall be shot on the spot," he was able to see at a glance what had happened.

The coach-the driver had doubtless been misdirected, or the horses' heads had not been turned down this side road-stood lower down the lane than those who had occupied it. At the feet of the horses lay the man who was undoubtedly the coachman; by his side knelt the Comtesse de Valorme, looking up at the boors who had attacked the party. Jeanne, her maid, an elderly woman, seemed to have fainted inside the coach; while old Ambroise, who was weeping and shaking all over, stood with a footman close by the side of his mistress.

Now, as Bevill dismounted, Madame de Valorme, looking up at him, exclaimed:

"Ah! The Capitaine Le Blond. Heaven be praised!"

But Bevill had no time to be startled at hearing himself addressed thus, nor to speculate as to whether the Comtesse had discovered his assumed name from the landlord, or had herself searched for it in the register. His attention was otherwise needed.

"You brute dogs!" he exclaimed in the best Dutch he could muster. "So 'tis thus war begins with you-by attacks on women and old men." While, as he spoke, he thrust his discharged pistol back into the right holster and drew out that in the left.

"We are starving," one man said. "You-you-French trample us down, take all-you, who are as bad as the Spaniards were. We retaliate when we can."

"Is there a rope?" Bevill asked, looking down from his seat on the horse and addressing Ambroise and the younger man, the footman. "One used in the coach? If so, fetch it."

"A rope!" the men howled now, while two of them flung themselves on their knees and whined and screamed for mercy. "A rope! Spare us-spare us! We have taken nothing."

"Except a life," Bevill exclaimed, glancing at the body of the coachman.

Meanwhile, the footman had mounted the box of the coach and was busily engaged in uncording the valises piled up on top of it. But while he did so the Comtesse de Valorme had risen to her feet and had held out her hand to Bevill, which he, after dismounting, took in his.

"How shall a helpless woman, travelling with only serving men in attendance on her, thank one who is strong and brave enough to rescue her?" madame asked. "How? Ah! monsieur-"

"Madame in Comtesse." Bevill replied, "I have but done that which every man would do for a woman. I beseech you say no more."

"It may be that at Liège," the Comtesse continued (and Bevill could not but observe how, as she spoke, her blue eyes looked into his as though endeavouring to read, to decipher, what impression her words might make on him), "at Liège I can return-"

"Madame!"

" – Some of your chivalrous service. Even though proffered to a French officer," and now those eyes shone like sapphires, "in safety-in-a French garrison, a woman's assistance may be worth acceptance."

"She knows me for what I am," Bevill thought; "or, rather, for what I am not. And she will not betray me."

The few words that had been exchanged between him and the Comtesse de Valorme were uttered in low tones, though, even had they been spoken clearly, it is doubtful if the boors who were trembling close by them would have heard, or, in hearing, have understood. For now their courage, their Dutch courage, had left them; they deemed their fate at hand, since, armed as this man was and with a horse on which to pursue them, flight would have been vain.

At this moment their fears were at their height; their whimpers were turned into shrieks and supplications. The footman had descended, bearing in his hand a rope some ten or twelve feet long;

while, as the man who had shot one of them and, in a moment, terrified the rest into abject fear, took it in his own hands, they saw that his eyes were directed towards an elm that grew by the side of the road.

"In mercy's sake," the Comtesse whispered, since she, too, saw Bevill's glance, "in the name of Him Who forgives all sinners, proceed to no extremities. And-and-Joseph, my coachman, is not truly dead. The ball has but grazed his face and stunned him. Monsieur, I beseech you-nay, I-"

"Madame," Bevill replied, turning his back to the men who were, in absolute fact, his prisoners, "I had no thought of executing them. But still punishment is their meed. Therefore, I will have them bound to that tree and, at the next village or town-it should be one called St. Trond-there may be some Prévôt-Maréchal or Captain of Maréchaussée to whom we can denounce them. The French, our troops-"

"Yes. Our troops?" with another swift glance.

"Are all about. The line stretches from Antwerp to Cologne, and across the Rhine. Into their hands shall these ruffians be delivered. They shall be the instruments of justice."

Half an hour after this decision had been come to the coach of the Comtesse de Valorme was on its way once more; but now it was driven by the young footman, at whose side Ambroise sat. Outside was Joseph also, who had recovered from the shock he had received, and was now engaged in thanking Heaven for the narrow escape that had been vouchsafed to him, and in calling down blessings on the Comtesse and Jeanne (on whose shoulder his head rested) and Bevill indiscriminately.

Sometimes ahead of the great travelling carriage, and sometimes-though not often-by the side of the open window, where Madame sat, Bevill Bracton rode now as escort. But, as he did so, while keeping ever a vigilant look-out to right and left and in front of him-for he knew not if other groups similar to those who were now, with the exception of the man wounded by him, all tied firmly and back to back to the elm tree, might be about-his thoughts did not dwell on the rescue he had by chance effected, but on the woman he had preserved from outrage and insult. Also, they dwelt on what must be the state of that woman's mind at this time.

"For she is French, and I am a subject of her country's bitterest foe-and she knows it. Or, not knowing, still suspects. And yet-and yet-if I mistake her not, if I have read her aright, I have rendered her harmless. Likewise, she is a good woman. She pleaded for mercy for those vagabonds, not knowing that there was no need for pleading, since I am no hangman; she spoke of Him Who pardons all sinners. 'Tis not of such stuff as this that spies, denouncers, women who rend the hand that is held out to them, are made. Yet, knowing all, she must be torn with vastly conflicting feelings. How shall she reconcile herself to befriending one who is of those who would render her ambitious, evil King harmless? How shall she, a Frenchwoman, bring herself to be the ally of an Englishman?"

But still, even as Bevill mused, he knew that he and his secret, or as much as she knew or could guess of it, were safe in this woman's hands.

A moment later, he had certain proof that he had divined aright.

They were drawing near St. Trond now; ahead of them they could see the smoke curling up in the afternoon air, and they could also see the men lounging at the barrier through which admission was gained to the town.

"We shall be there," the Comtesse said to Bevill, who was at this time riding by the window of the coach, while directing her glance to the little place, "ere many moments are passed. Monsieur," and she put her gloved hand upon the sash and leant forward towards him, "those men will have suffered enough by the time they are released from that tree. I ask you not to call the attention of any Prévôt or officer of Maréchaussée to their being there, or to their attack on me."

"Madame is truly of a forgiving nature. Yet, since it is her concern, not mine-"

"It would be best, even though, unhappily, forgiveness plays no part in my desire. Questions might be asked, explanations required; nay," and once more the deep blue eyes looked full into Bevill's, "some of monsieur's brother mousquetaires may be here." And now those eyes looked

strangely; almost it seemed as though they conveyed a menace. Yet, Bevill asked himself, even as a chill seemed to strike to his heart, as icy fingers seemed to clutch at it, could this woman be false; a traitress to one who had helped and succoured her? Was she no better than a female Sparmann?

"She spoke," he said to himself, "of Him Who pardons all sinners; she besought mercy for those who had molested her. Can such as she be a spy? I will never believe it."

Then, suddenly gazing down at her-and now the intensity of his glance equalled her own, while he saw she did not blench beneath it-he said, not roughly, yet determinately:

"Have done with equivocations, madame, with pointed words," remembering the accentuation of those words "monsieur's brother mousquetaires." "Speak plainly. Truth, openness, are ever best."

"If," the Comtesse said now, though still all was not open, her meaning not altogether apparent, "if you are what I believe-nay, what I know you to be-and you are discovered, your life is in awful danger. If you reach Liège you will, if betrayed, never quit it alive."

"Who shall betray me to my death? Answer me. Since you have told so much, tell more. What is it you know, and who and what are you?"

"A woman," the Comtesse answered. "One who does not betray gallant men to their deaths."

"This death you speak of is certain?"

"Certain. Beyond all doubt. For you are-"

"What?"

"Listen. Bend down from your horse. Not even they," with a glance above to where the servants were, "must hear."

"Great Heaven!" Bevill exclaimed when he had done so and she had whispered in his ear.

For the words she had thus whispered were: "You are an Englishman, and your name is not Le Blond. Have I not said truly? If you are discovered your doom is certain."

CHAPTER VII

The names of some of its past rulers as well as Spanish governors have stamped themselves deeply over all Brabant; and scarcely was there an inn or wayside hostelry to be found in the towns and villages surrounding the old capital of Brussels that did not bear for sign either that of "La Duchesse de Parma," "Le Duc de Brabant," "Le Comte d'Egmont," or, greater still, "Le Prince d'Orange," it being William the Silent, the great Liberator, to whom reference was made.

These names constituted a strange mixture, and combined to form a strange gallery of reminiscences. The first recalled a stately woman of high lineage on one side and base origin on the other. She was the daughter of Charles Quint, of "*Charles qui triche*,"² and the sister of Philip, the thousandfold murderer—a woman fierce as the she-wolf when robbed of its whelps, yet often merciful; one who, to her eternal glory, despised that other murderer, that persecutor of all of the Reformed Faith, the Duke of Alva, and kept him in his place, while sometimes forcing even him to cease from shedding the blood of the innocent. The second recorded those rulers of Brabant, among whose numbers had been produced holy men and scoffers, poets and tyrants; *jongleurs* and minstrels and buffoons; knights as brave as ever Bayard was, and cowards who shuddered and whimpered in their innumerable palaces if but a few of their subjects muttered in the streets or congregated in small knots at the street corners. The third perpetuated the name of Lamoral d'Egmont, brave, bold, and vain; one who had been shipwrecked in corners of the world that had then been hardly heard of; who had fought for the new faith like a lion, yet had almost dreaded death, but had, nevertheless, died like a hero and a martyr at the headsman's hands in the great square of Brussels. The fourth was he who crushed Philip II. and Spain and all their myrmidons under his heel, who established for ever the Reformed Faith as the recognised national religion from the German Ocean to the Ural Mountains, and who perished at the hand of an assassin bribed by Philip to do the deed.

In St. Trond, where the Comtesse de Valorme had decided to rest for the night, it was the same as at Louvain, Brussels, and all other places. Those names were still perpetuated over the doors of the inn; the lineaments of their bearers swung in the breeze or were painted on the walls.

"Another 'Duc de Brabant,'" the Comtesse said to Bevill, as now the coach passed an inn of this name. It was the first they came to, and the landlord, running out bareheaded, begged of Madame to honour his house.

"Well, so be it. It is to the former one that I owe my meeting with a gallant defender. I will rest here. And Monsieur Le Blond—where does he purpose sojourning for the night?"

Perceiving that there was probably in this question some feeling of delicacy on the part of Madame de Valorme, some sentiment of propriety as to their not entering the town in company—they who, until those whispered words of an hour ago, had been all but unknown to each other—and of afterwards staying in company in the same inn, Bevill, casting his eyes across the *place*, said:

"There is another inn for travellers over there, and it is called 'Le Prince d'Orange.' It has a quiet, peaceful air. It will do very well. Also, since I have constituted myself the cavalier of Madame until Liège is reached, I shall be near at hand to keep watch and ward."

"Monsieur is very good. Farewell, monsieur. Goodnight. When," she asked, as an afterthought, "does monsieur intend to set out?"

"Early, madame. Even though 'tis but little distance to my destination, yet I would fain be there and about the work I have to do."

"If," Madame de Valorme said now, after observing with one glance from her clear eyes that her servants—who had now all descended and were directing the porters of the inn what baggage was

² Brantôme, who lived shortly after Charles V.'s time, says all the other monarchs called him this because he never kept a treaty, and cheated everybody.

to be taken into the house and what might be left on the top of the coach for the night-were out of earshot-"if monsieur seeks for peace and repose in Liège-though in truth it is not very like that such as he will require any such things in a French garrison " – and her eyes were on Bevill, while almost seeming to smile at him and at the knowledge of his secret, which he now knew she possessed-"I go to join some kindred whose house will be open to him. Monsieur has been a gallant chevalier to me-"

"I beseech madame to forget any foolish, trifling service I have rendered her by chance."

"I shall not forget, and" – though now she paused, and said next a word, and then paused again as though in hesitation and doubt, and still, a moment later, went on again-"and it may be that all service-all mutual service-is not yet at an end between us. If, as I believe, there is some-"

"Some what, madame?"

"Nay; I will say no more. Or only this: I, too, go to Liège about a work I have to do. A work" – and now she leant forward in the coach from which she had naturally not yet descended, while continuing in a low tone-"to which I am vowed, to which my life is vowed; a task in which so long as I have life I will not falter. And I have a hope, a belief, a supposition-call it what you will-that in you I may by chance light on one who can help me at little cost to himself."

"I protest, madame," Bevill almost stammered at hearing these words, "I protest that-"

"Listen, Monsieur le Blond," the Comtesse said, speaking so low that now her voice was no more than a whisper, a murmur, yet a whisper so clear that, by bending his head, the young man could catch every syllable she uttered. "Listen. Yet, ere you do so, promise me that no word I let fall, no thought I give utterance to, shall cause you offence, or, if I may say it, fear?"

"Fear? I fear nothing on this earth. While as for the rest, I promise."

"Enough." Then in, if it could be so, a yet lower tone, the Comtesse de Valorme continued:

"As I have said, you are not what you seem to be. You are not le Capitaine le Blond for he was a kinsman of mine and I knew him well. I-I-a Frenchwoman-ah! shame on me, good as my cause is-only hope you may be-"

"What?"

"As faithful to my desire, my secret, when you learn it, as I will be to yours. If so, then all will be well!"

"What else can madame believe I shall be? Speak. I will answer truthfully."

"No; I have said enough-for to-night. Farewell. I, too, leave this place early. Farewell, or rather adieu." And the Comtesse put out her hand to Bevill.

The landlord had been standing in the great stoop of his house while this whispered colloquy had taken place; and now, while seeing with extreme regret that the handsome, well-apparelled young horseman who had escorted the lady in the coach to his door, was not himself going to patronise him, he came forward to the carriage. Wherefore, as Bevill turned the horse's head towards "Le Prince d'Orange" he murmured respectfully, "Madame la Comtesse" – since the coronet on the carriage, if not the servants' own words, had told him the personage with whom he had to deal-"the necessities have been taken to madame's apartments. Will Madame la Comtesse please to enter?"

Meanwhile, Bevill had ridden across to the rival place of entertainment, had given La Rose into the charge of the stableman, and had chosen a front room on the first floor of that rambling but substantial house.

"There is some strange mystery in this woman," he mused, as he stood on the balcony to which the window of the room gave access, and gazed across to the opposite inn. "Something that passes comprehension. Still, no matter, since there is also a mystery about me. And she knows it; she informs me she knows it, and yet proffers me help and assistance. Whatever else she is, she is at least no traitor to the man who has rendered her some light, trifling service. I am here; she is across the *place*. If in the night aught of evil should befall her-and in this disturbed land troubles may well come-I am near her. We are friends, auxiliaries, though enemies by race."

But now, springing from out of these musings, there returned to Bevill's mind the memory of one word that had risen to it; the recollection that, in pondering over the mystery of the Comtesse de Valorme, he had discarded from his thoughts the suggestion that she could be a traitor of another description.

"To me? No! Never! Perish the thought!" he exclaimed, as he stepped back from the balcony and threw himself on an old couch by the window. "No; but what if she be a traitor to her country, to France! By birth, by blood, by all hereditary instincts we are foes, and yet she offers me help and protection. Le Blond, the man under whose name I masquerade, whose very horse I ride, was kinsman to her; yet she, knowing what I am, makes offers of assistance. She a Frenchwoman and I an Englishman!

"She prayed," Bevill went on, "that I might be what she believes I am. She asked earlier if I could give her information of my Lord Marlborough's movements and plans. Great heavens! Does she desire to betray her country into his hands?" Then, suddenly, he sprang from his seat, exclaiming, "No, no! Never will I believe it! Never There is some other cause that moves thig woman to act as she is doing. That is the reason for her desire to reach Liége. It is not, cannot be, treachery."

The evening was at hand now-one of the soft calm evenings which, in the Netherlands, in fine weather, are at times almost as soft and calm as the nights of more southern lands; nights when here, through all this marshy country, made fertile and rich by centuries of toil, the fireflies dance in the dusk as in far off Italy; when the sun sinks a globe of flame into the bosom of the German Ocean, and when as it does so, the stars begin to stud the skies.

Such a night, such a twilight as this was no time for indoors: and Bevill, recognising that for two hours at least it would be folly to seek his bed with any hope of sleeping, went forth after his supper to take the air. Or rather, since his ride had given him sufficient of that, to observe what might be doing in the little town.

Of French troops he observed that there were few about, though some men of the Régiment de Monsieur (the Duc d'Orléans) and some others of the Artillery were drinking outside an inn while being regarded with lowering looks by groups of the inhabitants.

"French-French always!" he heard one man say to the other. "French always and everywhere! When will the English or our own troops come?"

"Have patience," another said. "Already, a month ago, even before the war was declared, was not Kaiserswörth besieged by the English general Athlone? The city will soon fall now."

"English? Dutch-our countryman-you should say. Is not the Lord Athlone a Dutchman? Is he not Ginkell?"

"What matters, so that one or the other does it? Soon Marlborough will be here. Then we shall see."

"Meanwhile, he is not here, and the French are; and they eat us out of house and home, and do not pay too well."

"They will pay with their skins ere long."

But Bevill knew as much as this himself, so, continuing his walk, he soon returned towards the inns in which, he on the one side the *place* and the Comtesse de Valorme on the other, they were to rest for the night. But when on the *place* he could not refrain from letting his eyes wander to the "Duc de Brabant," while speculating idly as to where his companion might be installed in it.

He soon knew, however, since on the first floor of the house he observed that the long wooden shutters were open, and the windows thrown back, doubtless to admit the cool air of the coming night, while he also saw that Jeanne passed once or twice before them. As he did so he could not prevent his thoughts from turning once more to the mystery in which the Comtesse seemed to be enveloped, or from wondering again and again why she should testify such interest in him, a stranger.

Could he have gazed into one of those rooms in the "Duc de Brabant" could he have seen the Comtesse seated in a deep *fauteuil* wrapped in meditation; above all, could he have caught the

occasional expressions that fell from her lips; or, gazing into her mind, have probed her innermost thoughts, he would have wondered no longer.

"For fourteen years now," he would in such a case have heard her say, or have gathered from the Comtesse de Valorme's thoughts, "we have suffered and borne all from him-and from her who sits by his side. From her, the scourge and curse of France, the snake that sucks the life-blood from all who do not worship as she does. Oh! God," he would have heard the undoubtedly unhappy woman exclaim, as she lifted her eyes, "how long is it to be? How long for all of us? Fathers, mothers, husbands, all-all-dead-done to death, either on the wheel or the gallows, or in the galleys or the dungeons. And for what? Because we desire to worship God in our own way-the way his grandsire promised solemnly that we should worship: the way for following which this one burns us, racks us, destroys our homes, drives us forth to exile and beggary."

Still gazing in at those open windows from the other side of the *place*, while unable to see the woman on whom his thoughts rested, Bevill did at last, however, discover that she was there. As he still stood and meditated, her form came suddenly before his eyes and he recognised that she must have suddenly sprung up from some chair or couch; while, from her commencing to pace the room and by her almost distracted appearance, he gathered that her mind was a prey to the most agitating thoughts. Even then, however, he could not divine what those thoughts might be, or that he was the central figure of them. This was as impossible as it was for him to hear her say:

"And now this man, who is, since he does not deny it, an Englishman; this man, disguised as a French soldier, while, in sober truth, I do believe him to be an English one, is on his way to Liège on some secret mission. 'Some work he has to do,' as he avowed. What work? What? Is he a spy of the English generals? Above all, can he help me? Can he bring me to Marlborough, give me the opportunity I have so long desired of throwing myself at his feet, of beseeching him to hurry forward that invasion of the South which can alone save those of us who are still alive? Can he? Can he? Oh, if I did but know!"

Suddenly, as Bevill stood there gazing at the undoubtedly unhappy, distracted woman there came the ripple of a cool evening breeze through the heated air that the day had left behind. A light breeze that shook the leaves of the orange trees in their tubs before the inn doors, and also those of the pollards which grew round the *place*. A moment later he saw Jeanne pull to the wooden shutters. Except for a streak of light that issued from the air slits at the top of them, all was now dark and veiled.

"Poor lady!" Bevill said to himself, as now, in the same manner as he had done overnight, and as he would do every night whenever he might be on the road, or on any journey-and as, perhaps, he would do should he and Sylvia Thorne be able to make their way out of Liège, in the endeavour to fall in with any of the English or Dutch forces-he directed his steps towards the stables of the "Prince d'Orange" to see that all was well with his horse.

Those stables were reached by passing down a small alley or *ruelle* that ran by the side of the "Prince d'Orange," and lay behind the house, entrance being obtained by a turn to the right when the end of the alley was attained.

Finding an ostler, or horse-watcher, in this alley, Bevill requested the man to accompany him to the door and unlock it; but, learning that the stables were not yet closed and would not be for yet another hour, and that there was a lanthorn hanging on the hook inside, he proceeded alone.

A moment later he pushed open the door and called to the mare, who by now knew not only his voice, but the new name he had given her, and learnt by her whimper that she had recognised his presence.

But as he advanced to see that all was well with her, he heard a rustle in the straw of an empty stall close by the door, and the next instant saw a man walk swiftly out of that stall and through the door into the alley-a man whose cloak was thrown across his face and held by his right hand, and whose slouching hat fell over the upper part of it. Yet this attempted and almost successful disguise did not

altogether serve to cloak the whole of his features. His eyes, dark and flashing, appeared above the edging of the cloak. Where his hand held the folds together there protruded a wisp of grizzled beard.

"Where have I seen those eyes, that beard before?" Bevill wondered, while remembering a moment later.

"It is Sparmann!" he said. "Sparmann! And he is following either the Comtesse or me-or both."

After which he went swiftly to the mare and made a rapid but thorough inspection of her, thereby to discover if she was injured in any part; and also looked to see if the fodder remained untampered with in the manger; while, taking up next the half-emptied bucket, he threw the water that remained in it away, and, going out into the alley, refilled it.

"I will stay here until the stables are locked for the night," he said, approaching the horse-watcher. "I mistrust that fellow I saw creep out from here but a moment ago."

CHAPTER VIII

"This threatens danger," Bevill thought to himself after he had spoken to the man in the alley, and had received from him a surly grunt and the information that the other was, like himself, a traveller having his own horse in another stall. But the ostler did not add the words that Bevill had expected to hear-viz., that this traveller was, also like himself, a Frenchman. He remembered, however, a moment later, that though Sparmann was now undoubtedly a French spy, he was absolutely as much a Dutchman as any native of St. Trond, and could, consequently, pass easily as a man who was voyaging from one part of the Netherlands to another.

In recollecting this, there came suddenly into his mind a thought-an inspiration-a reflection that, in such a circumstance lay the chance of outwitting, of silencing-though only for a time, yet perhaps for long enough-this fellow who, beyond almost all possibility of doubt, was here with the view of causing harm to him.

"He is a Hollander," Bevill thought to himself as he stood outside the courtyard of "Le Prince d'Orange," while undecided as to whether he should endeavour to see, or at least to communicate with, the Comtesse. "A Hollander, yet one who is now in the service of France, and, consequently, an enemy to all things Dutch. If-if-I denounced him to-night to some of the burghers of this place, to some native magistrate here, as he will endeavour to denounce me to some of the French who hold the place, it will go hard with him. These Dutch may, because they must at present, tolerate the French army, but they will not tolerate a spy who is their own countryman amongst them. Yet how to do it? Above all, how to do it at once? Let me reflect."

As he so reflected, however, he was already crossing the *place*, and in a moment was in front of the courtyard of "Le Duc de Brabant," which, although it was similar to that of the inn where he had put up, was nevertheless considerably larger than the latter. Halting, however, under the archway that led into this yard, he saw the great coach of Madame de Valorme standing out in the dark, and observed that, from some of the lower windows of the inn, there still gleamed the rays of a lamp or other light, as well as the beams from a lanthorn hung on a hook outside the stable door. Thus the coach and the baggage on the top of it stood clearly out, thin and weakly though the rays of light might be, and by their aid he was able to perceive other things.

He saw that Joseph, the coachman, on account of whose ill-treatment by the Brabant peasants that afternoon he had lodged a bullet in the shoulder of one of them, was now strapping up a valise on the roof of the coach; a valise that he divined easily had already been used this evening and repacked and closed, and then sent down to be put in its place in time for the morning's departure. Near the coachman, who now seemed to be entirely recovered from his slight injury-which had been only prevented by an inch from being a fatal one-there stood a *facchin*, or porter of the inn, who had evidently brought down the valise and was now going away to, in all probability, fetch another.

"Joseph," Bevill said now to the man as he descended from the box on which he had been standing while strapping the valise, "Joseph, come down. I wish to speak to you on a matter of serious concern."

Astonished at seeing beneath him the dashing horseman who, at a critical moment for all concerned, had suddenly appeared amongst the boors who had attacked his mistress's coach, and-which he did not overlook-nearly killed him, Joseph sprang to the ground, while doffing the hat he wore and instantly commencing a long series of thanks and utterances of gratitude to Bevill, all of which he had previously uttered many times during the continuation of the journey.

"No matter for that," said Bevill, while looking round to see that they were out of earshot, and remarking that the *facchin* had disappeared. "I need no more thanks, nor have needed any. But, Joseph-your mistress? Where is she? If it may be so, if it can be compassed, I must speak with her to-night."

"To-night, monsieur? *Helas!* it is impossible. She has retired; the necessities are all distributed there," glancing up at the roof of the vehicle, "save one small chest that remains in the rooms for use in the morning. It is impossible, monsieur," he repeated. "But," the man went on, "if monsieur has anything to confide, if he requires any service which one so humble as I can give, monsieur knows where he can obtain it. Monsieur punished the ruffians who endeavoured to slay me. If one so poor as I can-

"Nay, no matter; yet-yet-it is of grave import. There has happened that which thrusts against my hopes of reaching Liège, of reaching that city in company of-almost, may I say, in charge of Madame-

"What, monsieur, what?" the man exclaimed in a low voice. "Monsieur is in some peril? And he, our preserver-

"Listen," Bevill said, thinking it best to at once tell this man the worst. "It may be that ere morning I shall no longer be able to accompany Madame La Comtesse on her road."

"Oh, monsieur!" Joseph exclaimed. "Oh, monsieur! Monsieur is indeed in some peril. What is it, monsieur?"

"There is a man now staying at the inn where I am, at 'Le Prince d'Orange,' who knows a secret of mine which may undo me if divulged. He is a Dutchman, yet now he serves France-our country-as the basest of creatures. He is a spy, one employed by France. What's that?" Bevill broke off to say, hearing a slight noise in the stable close by.

"I heard nothing, monsieur. Doubtless one of the horses moving. It is nothing. Please go on, monsieur."

"Yet also is he, as I say, an enemy of mine. He may denounce me as one having sympathy with these Dutch, as one favourable to this Grand Alliance. Ha!" Bevill exclaimed, breaking off again. "Look! Did'st' see. That man who passed outside the entry but now, his cloak about him! One with dark, piercing eyes and a flash of grey beard showing. That is the man. I will follow him, prevent him, if possible, from carrying out his intentions to-night."

"And so also will I, monsieur. Let me but get my coat and whinyard, and I will be with you. But an instant, monsieur. But an instant."

"Nay," Bevill called, even as the man sped towards the great wooden staircase that led out of the courtyard up to the balconies outside the various floors; "nay, stay here, I command you. Stay here by your mistress to whom your service is due. I need no assistance. It is man to man, as," he muttered grimly through set teeth, "it was two years ago in England."

Then, seeing that Joseph had disappeared up the stairs, Bevill went swiftly out of the courtyard and under the arch into the street.

But he did not know that, as he did so, another man had followed in his footsteps.

A man who, almost ere he was outside the entrance, had softly pushed open the stable door and then, after looking round stealthily to make sure that he was not observed, had come out himself, while thrusting into the folds of his coarse shirt something that gleamed for an instant in the rays of the lanthorn.

"What was it he said?" this man muttered to himself in a hoarse, raucous voice. "What? I could not hear all-yet enough. A Dutchman! One of us-who has joined these accursed French as a spy on us. On us-*ach! Himmel!* On us, his countrymen. Ha! Let me but find him, and he spies no more in this world."

And now this man was also in the *place*-the deserted place in which glittered but one or two oil lamps hung on chains stretched across the road, yet which was well lighted now by a late risen moon that was in her third quarter-a moon that was topping now the pointed, crenellated roofs of the old houses and flooding the whole space with its beams. By this light the man saw that he was not yet too late.

He saw the tall form of Bevill turning away from the door of "Le Prince d'Orange," and understood that the man, who had in his hearing denounced the other as a spy, had been to see if the latter had entered the inn. He saw, too, by looking up the one long street that led from the *place*, that the denouncer paused for a moment and then went swiftly along it. Seeing this, he understood, and himself followed swiftly, while now and again putting his hand in his breast as though to make sure of what was hidden there.

"He is gone that way," he muttered, "and the other knows it. So, too, do I know it now. Between us we shall run the fox to ground."

Thus they went on: the first man invisible to the last, but the second kept well in view by that last; then suddenly the latter paused.

He paused, with a muttered imprecation; paused while withdrawing himself into the deep, dark stoop of an old house.

"He has missed him! Missed him! He is coming back. The spy has escaped. Ah! ah! the chance is gone. If he has missed him how shall I ever find him?"

A moment later this watcher started, while giving utterance to some sound that was, now, neither imprecation nor exclamation, but, in truth, a gasp. A gasp full of astonishment, nevertheless; a gasp that surprise seemed to have choked back into his throat.

For he who was coming back was not the tall, handsomely apparelled young man who had started forth in pursuit of him whom he had denounced as a renegade spy; but, instead, another. An older man, one who held a dark cloak across his features from which some wisp of a grey beard projected; one who, as he came swiftly towards that stoop where the man was hidden, looked back and back, and back again, and glinted a pair of dark eyes up and down the street as though in mortal fear.

"He's mine," the watcher whispered to himself. "He's mine. He will spy no more."

As he so spoke, the man who was returning drew near the stoop, his footsteps fell outside it. He was before it!

* * * * *

"How did I miss him? What twist or turn did the vagabond take whereby to avoid me?" Bevill pondered the next morning, as now the soft, roseate hue of the sun suffused the skies that, half an hour before, had been daffodil and, before that, lit by the moon. For it was four o'clock now, and the daylight had dawned on one of the last remaining days of May.

Four o'clock! And Bevill Bracton, after he had re-entered his room, disheartened at having missed Sparmann, had sat from midnight until now on a chair at a table by the window, while sternly refraining from lying down for fear that, thereby, he might fall asleep and so be trapped by some of the French soldiery whom the spy would possibly have put on his track.

He had asked himself the above question a dozen, a score, a hundred times during these hours. He had muttered again and again, "How did I miss him? How lose sight of him?" yet was always unable to find an answer to the question.

Also Bevill had asked himself another, a more important question which, not only in his own mind but in actual fact, remained unanswered. Why, since Sparmann had escaped him, had he not already been denounced? Why, through the night as it passed away, or in the cool coming of the dawn, had he heard no tread of provost's picket, or corporal's guard, coming down the street to the inn to arrest him? Yet his ancient enemy had but to warn them that here, in "Le Prince d'Orange," was an Englishman on whom would be found a Frenchman's passport, the passport of a secretary of the French Embassy in London, for his doom to be swift and sure. A hurried examination, a still more hurried trial, and-a platoon of soldiers! That was all.

Yet nothing had come during those hours of the passing night. Nothing had disturbed the watcher and listener at that table by the window, nothing had caused him to even glance towards his

unsheathed sword as it lay on the undisturbed bed, nothing to cause his hand to advance one inch towards the pistols placed on a chair by his side. A dog barking, some labourers going forth to their toil, the striking of the hours by the church clock; but nothing more. And now the day was come and he was still free and unsought for.

"Even had I been sought for it may be that I might have escaped from out the town at break of day," Bevill mused now; "but what of her opposite? What of the woman who depends on me and my succour if needed-the woman who, knowing that I am no Frenchman and am, since all the world is against France or France's king, doubtless her enemy, does not betray me? Might have escaped? No! I could not have done that."

"Why," he continued, still reflecting, "has that man held his peace? Does he doubt that he may be mistaken, that I am not his old enemy and victor; or does he fear that, as he might betray me to his new masters, so might I find opportunity to betray him to his old ones, to his countrymen? In truth, it may be so."

The little town was waking up to the work of the day by this time. Windows were being thrown open to the rays of the bright morning sun. Away, outside the town, the bugles and trumpets of those who held the place in subjection could be heard, and, a moment later, Bevill saw Jeanne thrust aside the shutters of the rooms of the first floor of the "Duc de Brabant."

"I had best make my way across," Bevill mused, as now he refreshed himself with some hearty ablutions and made the usual toilet of travellers of that day. "It seems that I am to be unmolested for the present. Therefore will I start at once, and the sooner the better! leaving word that, as near as may be, I will await the coach of Madame la Comtesse beyond the town."

Thrusting, therefore, his sword into his belt, and his pistols into his deep pockets, he threw open the door of the room and went out into the passage. As he did so, however, he saw the sun streaming through the open door of another bedroom farther down, and heard voices proceeding from inside the room.

"Not in all night!" he heard one voice say, while recognising it as that of the landlady. "Not in all night! And he a man of years! Surely he is not a wastrel and a roysterer? It may be so, since he says he is a Frenchman, though he has not the air thereof. Perhaps he has been carousing with their dissolute soldiery. Or-*ach!*-if he should have ridden off without payment. *Ach!* 'tis like enough!"

"His horse is in the stable," another voice, that of an ancient *femme de chambre*, replied. "He has not done that. Yet, all the same, 'tis strange. *Ja Wohl*, it is strange."

"It must be *him* of whom they speak," Bevill thought to himself, as now he passed the door, and, giving "good-day" to the women within the room, went down the stairs and out into the street, after which he crossed the *place* to the "Duc de Brabant."

The coach of the Comtesse de Valorme was as he had seen it last night. At present there was no sign of departure; the horses had not yet been brought from the stable, and none of madame's servants were about. In the courtyard, however, the stableman and *facchins* were sluicing the whole place with buckets of water and brushing and mopping the stones, amongst them being the one who had brought down the valises to Joseph overnight.

Calling this man towards him with the intention of asking him to bring Jeanne Or Joseph down for a moment, so that he might leave a message for the Comtesse, he observed that he had a huge bruise on his face, one that was almost raw, and bled slightly.

"You have hurt yourself," Bevill said kindly to the fellow, after he had asked him to do his behest; and after, also, putting a piece of silver in his hand. "You would do well to put some styptic to your face."

"'Tis nothing, mynheer, nothing," the man muttered, as he pocketed the silver. "The lights were out as I went to my bed last night. The passages in this old house are dark as a pocket. It is nothing. I fell and bruised myself." After which he went away to summon one of the servants of her whom he called "Matame la Gomdesse."

A moment later Joseph appeared on the scene, and, ere Bevill could bid him inform Madame de Valorme that he thought it best to proceed past the barrier and out of the town at once, the coachman exclaimed:

"And the enemy of monsieur? The spy! What of him?"

"I lost him," Bevill replied. "He evaded me."

"And evidently he has not betrayed monsieur?"

"Evidently. It may be, Joseph, he supposed that in betraying me I might in return have betrayed him, if not to his new friends, at least to his old. Now, Joseph, I go. Present my respects to madame and say that a mile farther on the road to Liége I will await her coming."

CHAPTER IX

Month before Bevill Bracton had set out on the task of endeavouring in some way to assist Sylvia Thorne in quitting Liège, and, should Providence prove favourable, of enabling her to return to England under his charge, the whole of what was termed, comprehensively, Flanders was filled with various bodies of troops that were drawn from almost all the countries of Western and, consequently, civilised Europe.

Used-as this great combination of various states had long been called-as "The Great Barrier" -*i. e.*, the barrier between the aggressions of France and the safety of the Netherlands, it was, therefore, now filled with the above-named troops of the contending nations. To the most northern portion of it-from Antwerp on the west to Cologne on the east, and then downward to Kaiserswörth and Bonn-the French held possession under the ostensible command of the royal Duke of Burgundy, but actually under the command of the Maréchal de Boufflers, styled the second in command. With these were the troops of Spain under the command of Le Marquis de Bedmar. Other marshals and generals, such as Tallard (who was afterwards to lose the battle of Blenheim) and De Chamarande held high command under them.

The English and Dutch troops, many of the former of which had never been withdrawn since the Peace of Ryswick, made during the reign of William III., still held and garrisoned the more northern portions of the Flanders barrier. Of these, the principal commanders were, until Marlborough was appointed by the English and Dutch Governments Captain-General of the whole army of the Grand Alliance, Ginkell, Earl of Athlone, who was a Dutchman, and Coehoorn, who was another. Of towns and villages and outposts which the allied troops held at this time, Maestricht, a few miles north of Liège, was the principal; but rapidly, after the arrival of the Earl of Marlborough, many more were, one after the other, to fall into our hands.

By the time, however, that Bevill Bracton had reached Flanders, not only were continuous sieges and encounters taking place, but also continuous marchings and counter-marchings and deployings of troops. The ground which one week had been occupied and held by the French would, the next, be occupied by English or Dutch, Austrian or Hanoverian troops; Austria, which was the rival claimant to the throne of Spain, being the only Catholic country in the Alliance. Had her claims not been recognised and used as the pivot on which revolved the determination of the other Powers to break down, once and for all, the arrogant assumption of the King of France, she would never have been admitted as partner in this great alliance of Protestant princes. She was, however, the foundation stone of the great fabric, and could not be omitted.

The land, therefore, which formed part of the eastern portion of Brabant, as well as the whole of Limburg, the Electorate of Cologne, and the Bishopric of Liège, was at this time the scene of skirmishes, of attacks, and general hostilities that occurred almost daily; but, since these never attained to the dignity of a battle, they have gone unrecorded even in the most dry-as-dust of military annals. Indeed, they were frequently bloodless and often unimportant, the occasional hanging of a spy, or supposed spy, on one side or the other, or the detention of a person who could give no satisfactory account of himself, being unworthy of notice by any chronicler, even if any chronicler ever heard of the incidents-which is probably doubtful.

Almost directly St. Trond was quitted, the great Cologne road parted, as it still parts; the northern arm passing through Looz to Maestricht and the southern running straight to Liège by Waremmé, only to reunite later out side Liège.

At this bifurcation Bevill Bracton, drawing up his horse, paused beneath some trees and determined to await the coming of the Comtesse de Valorme.

It was still quite early, and, since he had been subjected to no delay at the gate, his passport having merely been glanced at by the soldier stationed there (perhaps because of the excellent French

he spoke, which was a great deal better than that of the man, who belonged to the Régiment de Perche from the far south of France) he knew that there was no likelihood of the Comtesse appearing yet. Therefore he rode on a few hundred paces farther towards where he had observed a signboard swinging from the branch of a tree, and decided that he would wait here for her arrival. Also, he had not yet broken his fast, and determined that now would be a good opportunity for doing so.

As he came within twenty or thirty yards of the signboard, which bore a heart painted on it-the emblem resembling more a heart painted on a card than that which is a portion of the human frame-and had beneath it, in Dutch, the words, "The Kindly Heart," he was astonished at hearing a voice call out "Halt!" Yet he was not so astonished at hearing the word, which is very similar in most languages, as in hearing the voice that uttered that word, since, undoubtedly, it was the voice of an Englishman.

Turning in the direction whence the sound came, Bevill did not see any person whatever. But what he did see was the short, squat, unbrowned barrel of a musketoon projecting through the interstices of a quickset hedge and covering him. A moment later the voice of the invisible owner of it repeated:

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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