

Emma Orczy

Beau Brocade: A Romance



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Beau Brocade

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Orczy Emmuska Orczy, Baroness Beau Brocade: A Romance

PART I THE FORGE

CHAPTER I BY ACT OF PARLIAMENT

The gaffers stood round and shook their heads.

When the Corporal had finished reading the Royal Proclamation, one or two of them sighed in a desultory fashion, others murmured casually, "Lordy! Lordy! to think on it! Dearie me!"

The young ones neither sighed nor murmured. They looked at one another furtively, then glanced away again, as if afraid to read each other's thoughts, and in a shamefaced manner wiped their moist hands against their rough cord breeches.

There were no women present fortunately: there had been heavy rains on the Moor these last three days, and what roads there were had become well-nigh impassable. Only a few men – some half-dozen perhaps – out of the lonely homesteads from down Brassington way, had tramped in the wake of the little squad of soldiers, in order to hear this Act of Parliament read at the cross-roads, and to see the document duly pinned to the old gallows-tree.

Fortunately the rain had ceased momentarily, only a cool, brisk nor'-wester came blustering across the Heath, making the older men shiver beneath their thin, well-worn smocks.

North and south, east and west, Brassing Moor stretched its mournful lengths to the distant framework of the Peak far away, with mile upon mile of grey-green gorse and golden bracken and long shoots of purple-stemmed bramble, and here and there patches of vivid mauve, where the heather was just bursting into bloom; or anon a clump of dark firs, with ruddy trunks and gaunt arms stretched menacingly over the sparse young life below.

And here, at the cross-roads, the Heath seemed more desolate than ever, despite that one cottage with the blacksmith's shed beyond it. The roads themselves, the one to Aldwark, the other from Wirksworth, the third little more than a morass, a short cut to Stretton, all bore mute testimony to the remoteness, the aloofness of this forgotten corner of eighteenth-century England.

Then there was the old gallows, whereon many a foot-pad or sheep-stealer had paid full penalty for his crimes! True, John Stich, the blacksmith, now used it as a sign-post for his trade: a monster horseshoe hung there where once the bones of Dick Caldwell, the highwayman, had whitened in the bleak air of the Moor: still, at moments like these, when no one spoke, the wind seemed to bring an echo of ghostly sighs and laughter, for Dick had breathed his last with a coarse jest on his lips, and the ears of the timid seemed still to catch the eerie sound of his horse's hoofs ploughing the ruddy, shallow soil of the Heath.

For the moment, however, the cross-roads presented a scene of quite unusual animation: the Corporal and his squad looked resplendent in their scarlet tunics and white buckskins, and Mr Inch, the beadle from Brassington, was also there in his gold-laced coat, bob-tailed wig and three-cornered hat: he had lent the dignity of his presence to this solemn occasion, and in high top-boots, bell in hand, had tramped five miles with the soldiers, so that he might shout a stentorian "Oyez! Oyez!" whenever they passed one of the few cottages along the road.

But no one spoke. The Corporal handed the Royal Proclamation to one of the soldiers; he too seemed nervous and ill at ease. The nor'-wester, with singular want of respect for King and Parliament, commenced a vigorous attack upon the great document, pulling at it in wanton frolic, almost tearing it out of the hands of the young soldier, who did his best to fix it against the shaft of the old gallows.

The white parchment looked uncanny and ghost-like fluttering in the wind; no doubt the nor'-wester would soon tear it to rags.

"Lordy! Lordy! to think on it!"

There it was, fixed up at last. Up, so that any chance traveller who could might read. But those who were now assembled there – shepherds, most of them, on the Moor – viewed the written characters with awe and misgiving. They had had Mr Inch's assurance that it was all writ there, that the King himself had put his name to it; and the young Corporal, who had read it out, had received the document from his own superior officer, who in his turn had had it at the hands of His Grace the Duke of Cumberland himself.

"It having come to the knowledge of His Majesty's Parliament that certain subjects of the King have lately raised the standard of rebellion, setting up the Pretender, Charles Edward Stuart, above the King's most lawful Majesty, it is hereby enacted that these persons are guilty of high treason and by the laws of the kingdom are therefore condemned to death. It is further enacted that it is unlawful for any loyal subject of the King to shelter or harbour, clothe or feed any such persons who are vile traitors and rebels to their King and country: and that any subject of His Majesty who kills such a traitor or rebel doth thereby commit an act of justice and loyalty, for which he may be rewarded by the sum of twenty guineas."

It was this last paragraph that made the gaffers shake their heads and say "Lordy! Lordy! to think on it! to think on it!" For it seemed but yesterday that the old Moor, aye, and the hamlets and villages of Derbyshire, were ringing with the wild shouts of Prince Charlie's Highland Brigade, but yesterday that his handsome face, his green bonnet laced with gold, his Highland plaid and rich accoutrements, had seemed to proclaim victory to the Stuart cause from one end of the county to the other.

To be sure, that glorious, mad, merry time had not lasted very long. All the wiseacres had foretold disaster when the Prince's standard broke, just as it was taken into my Lord Exeter's house in Full Street. The shaft snapped clean in half. What could that portend but humiliation and defeat?

The retreat from Derby was still fresh in everyone's memory, and there were those from Wirksworth who remembered the rear-guard of Prince Charlie's army, the hussars with their half-starved horses and bedraggled finery, who had swept down on the villages and homesteads round about Ashbourne and had pillaged and plundered to their hearts' content.

But then those were the fortunes of war; fighting, rushing, running, plundering, wild huzzas, mad cavalcades, noise, bustle, excitement, joy of victory, and sorrow of defeat, but this!! ... this Proclamation which the Corporal had brought all the way from Derby, and which had been signed by King George himself, this meant silence, hushed footsteps, a hidden figure perhaps, pallid and gaunt, hiding behind the boulders, or amidst the gorse on the Moor, or perishing mayhap at night, lost in the bog-land up Stretton way, whilst Judas-like treads crept stealthily on the track. It meant treachery too, the price of blood, a fellow-creature's life to be sold for twenty guineas.

No wonder the gaffers could think of nothing to say; no wonder the young men looked at one another shamefaced, and in fear.

Who knows? Any Derbyshire lad now might become a human bloodhound, a tracker of his fellow-creatures, a hunter of men. There were twenty guineas to be earned, and out there on the Heath, in the hut of the shepherd or the forge of the smith, many a pale wan face had been seen of late, which...

It was terrible to think on; for even out here, on Brassing Moor, there existed some knowledge of Tyburn Gate, and of Tower Hill.

At last the groups began to break up, the Corporal's work was done. His Majesty's Proclamation would flutter there in the cool September wind for awhile; then presently the crows would peck at it, the rain would dash it down, the last bit of dirty rag would be torn away by an October gale, but in the meanwhile the few inhabitants of Brassington and those of Aldwark would know that they might deny a starving fellow-creature bread and shelter, aye! and shoot him too, like a wild beast in a ditch, and have twenty guineas reward to boot.

"I've seen nought of John Stich, Master Inch," said the Corporal at last. "Be he from home?"

And he turned to where, just in the fork of the road, the thatched cottage, with a glimpse of the shed beyond it, stood solitary and still.

"Nay, I have not observated that fact, Master Corporal," replied Master Inch, clearing his throat for some of those fine words which had gained for him wide-spread admiration for miles around. "I had not observated that John Stich was from home. Though in verity it behoves me to say that I do not hear the sound of Master Stich's hammer upon his anvil."

"Then I'll go across at once," said the Corporal. "Forward, my men! John Stich might have saved me the trouble," he added, groping in his wallet for another copy of His Majesty's Proclamation.

"Nay, Master Corporal, do not give yourself the futile trouble of traversing the muddy road," said Mr Inch, sententiously. "John Stich is a loyal subject of King George, and by my faith! he would not harbourgate a rebel, take my word for it. Although, mind you, Mr Corporal, I have oft suspicionated..."

Mr Inch, the beadle, looked cautiously round; all the pompousness of his manner had vanished in a trice. His broad face beneath the bob-tailed wig and three-cornered hat looked like a rosy receptacle of mysterious information, as he laid his fat hand on the Corporal's sleeve.

The straggling groups of yokels were fast disappearing down the muddy tracks; some were returning to Brassington, others were tramping Aldwark way; one wizened, solitary figure was slowly toiling up the road, little more than a quagmire, that led northwards across the Heath towards Stretton Hall.

The soldiers stood at attention some fifteen yards away, mute and disinterested. From the shed beyond the cottage there suddenly came the sound of the blacksmith's hammer upon his anvil. Mr Inch felt secure from observation.

"I have oft suspicionated John Stich, the smith, of befriending the foot-pads and highwaymen that haunt this God-forsaken Moor," he said, with an air of excited importance, rolling his beady eyes.

"Nay," laughed the Corporal, good-humouredly, as he shook off Master Inch's fat hand. "You'd best not whisper this confidence to John Stich himself. As I live, he would crack your skull for you, Master Beadle, aye, be it ever so full of dictionary words. John Stich is an honest man, I tell you," he added with a pleasant oath, "the most honest this side of the county, and don't you forget it."

But Mr Inch did not approve of the young soldier's tone of familiarity. He drew up his five feet of broad stature to their full height.

"Nay, but I designated no harm," he said, with offended dignity. "John Stich is a worthy fellow, and I spoke of no ordinary foot-pads. My mind," he added, dwelling upon that mysterious possession with conscious pride, "my mind, I may say, was dominating on Beau Brocade."

"Beau Brocade!!!"

And the Corporal laughed with obvious incredulity, which further nettled Mr Inch, the beadle.

"Aye, Beau Brocade," he said hotly, "the malicious, pernicious, damned rascal, who gives us, that representate the majesty of the law, a mighty deal of trouble."

"Indeed?" sneered the Corporal.

"I dare swear that down at Derby," retorted Mr Inch, spitefully, "you have not even heard of that personage."

"Oh! we know well enough that Brassing Moor harbours more miscreants than any corner of the county," laughed the young soldier, "but methought Beau Brocade only existed in the imagination of your half-witted yokels about here."

"There you are in grave error, Master Corporal," remarked the beadle with dignity. "Beau Brocade, permit me to observe, does exist in the flesh. 'Twas only last night Sir Humphrey Challoner's coach was stopped not three miles from Hartington, and his Honour robbed of fifty guineas, by that pernicious highwayman."

"Then you must lay this Beau Brocade by the heels, Master Inch."

"Aye! that's easily said. Lay him by the heels forsooth, and who's going to do that, pray?"

"Nay, that's your affair. You don't expect His Grace the Duke of Cumberland to lend you a portion of his army, do you?"

"His Grace might do worse. Beau Brocade is a dangerous rascal to the quality."

"Only to the quality?"

"Aye, he'll not touch a poor man; 'tis only the rich he is after, and uses but little of his ill-gotten gain on himself."

"How so?" asked the Corporal, eagerly, for in spite of the excitement of camp life round about Derby, the fame of the daring highwayman had ere now tickled the fancy of the young soldiers of the Duke of Cumberland's army.

"Why, I told you Sir Humphrey Challoner was robbed on the Heath last night – robbed of fifty guineas, eh?" said Master Inch, whispering in eager confidence. "Well, this morning, when Squire West arrived at the court-house, he found fifty guineas in the poor box."

"Well?"

"Well, that's not the first time nor yet the second that such a matter has occurred. The dolts round about here, the lads from Brassington or Aldwark, or even from Wirksworth, would never willingly lay a hand on Beau Brocade. The rascal knows it well enough, and carries on his shameful trade with impunity."

"Odd's fish! but meseems the trade is not so shameful after all. What is the fellow like?"

"Nay, no one has ever seen his face, though his figure on the Moor is familiar to many. He is always dressed in the latest fashion, hence the villagers have called him Beau Brocade. Some say he is a royal prince in disguise – he always wears a mask; some say he is the Pretender, Charles Stuart himself; others declare his face is pitted with smallpox; others that he has the face of a pig, and the ears of a mule, that he is covered with hairs like a spaniel, or has a blue skin like an ape. But no one knows, and with half the villages on the Heath to aid and abet him, he is not like to be laid by the heels."

"A fine story, Master Inch," laughed the Corporal. "And is there no reward for the capture of your pig-faced, hairy, blue-skinned royal prince disguised as a common highwayman?"

"Aye, a reward of a hundred guineas," said Mr Inch, in a whisper that was hardly audible above the murmur of the wind. "A hundred guineas for the capture of Beau Brocade."

The Corporal gave a long significant whistle.

"And no one bold enough to attempt the capture?" he said derisively.

Mr Inch shook his head sadly.

"No one could do it single-handed; the rascal is cunning as well as bold, and..."

But at this point even Mr Inch's voluble tongue was suddenly and summarily silenced. The words died in his throat; his bell, the badge of his important public office, fell with a mighty clatter on the ground.

A laugh, a long, loud, joyous, mirthful laugh, rang clear as a silver gong from across the lonely Moor. Such a laugh as would make anyone's heart glad to hear, the laugh of a free man, of a man who is whole-hearted, of a man who has never ceased to be a boy.

And pompous Mr Inch slowly turned on his heel, as did also the young Corporal, and both gazed out upon the Heath; the patient little squad of soldiers too, all fixed their eyes upon one spot, just beyond John Stich's forge and cottage, not fifty yards away.

There, clearly outlined against the cloud-laden sky, was the graceful figure of a horse and rider; the horse, a sleek chestnut thoroughbred, which filled all the soldiers' hearts with envy and covetousness; the rider, a youthful, upright figure, whose every movement betokened strength of limb and elasticity of muscle, the very pose a model of ease and grace, the shoulders broad; the head, with a black mask worn over the face, was carried high and erect.

In truth it was a goodly picture to look upon, with that massive bank of white clouds, and the little patches of vivid blue as a rich, shimmering dome above it, the gold-tipped bracken, the purple heather all around, and far away, as a mist-covered background, the green-clad hills and massive Tors of Derbyshire.

So good a picture was it that the tardy September sun peeped through the clouds and had a look at that fine specimen of eighteenth-century English manhood, then paused awhile, perchance to hear again that mirthful, happy laugh.

Then came a gust of wind, the sun retreated, the soldiers gasped, and lo! before Mr Inch or Mr Corporal had realised that the picture was made of flesh and blood, horse and rider had disappeared, there, far out across the Heath, beyond the gorse and bramble and the budding heather, with not a handful of dust to mark the way they went.

Only once from far, very far, almost from fairy-land, there came, like the echo of a silver bell, the sound of that mad, merry laugh.

"Beau Brocade, as I live!" murmured Mr Inch, under his breath.

CHAPTER II

THE FORGE OF JOHN STICH

John Stich too had heard that laugh; for a moment he paused in his work, straightened his broad back and leant his heavy hammer upon the anvil, whilst a pleasant smile lit up his bronzed and rugged countenance.

"There goes the Captain," he said, "I wonder now what's tickling him. Ah!" he added with a short sigh, "the soldiers, maybe. He doesn't like soldiers much, doesn't the Captain."

He sighed again and looked across to where, on a rough wooden bench, sat a young man with head resting on his hand, his blue eyes staring moodily before him. The dress this young man wore was a counterpart of that in which John himself was arrayed; rough worsted stockings, thick flannel shirt with sleeves well tucked up over fine, muscular arms, and a large, greasy, well-worn leather apron, denoting the blacksmith's trade. But though the hands and face were covered with grime, a more than casual observer would soon have noticed that those same hands were slender and shapely, the fingers long, the nails neatly trimmed, whilst the face, anxious and careworn though it was, had in it a look of habitual command, of pride not yet crushed out of ken.

John Stich gazed at him for awhile, whilst a look of pity and anxiety saddened his honest face. The smith was a man of few words, he said nothing then, and presently the sound of his hammer upon the anvil once more filled the forge with its pleasant echo. But though John's tongue was slow, his ear was quick, and in one moment he had perceived the dull thud made by the Corporal's squad as, having parted from Mr Inch at the cross-roads, the soldiers ploughed their way through the mud round the cottage and towards the forge.

"Hist!" said John, in a rapid whisper, pointing to the fire, "the bellows! quick!"

The young man too had started in obvious alarm. His ear – the ear of a fugitive, trained to every sound that betokened danger – was as alert as that of the smith. With a sudden effort he pulled himself together, and quickly seized the heavy bellows with a will. He forced his eyes to glance carelessly at the door and his lips to whistle a lively country tune.

The Corporal paused a moment at the entrance, taking a quick survey of the interior of the forge, his men at attention behind him.

"In the King's name!" he said loudly, as he unfolded the Proclamation of His Majesty's Parliament.

His orders were to read it in every hamlet and every homestead in the district; John Stich, the blacksmith, was an important personage all around Brassing Moor, and he had not heard it read from beneath the old gallows at the cross-roads just now.

"Well, Corporal," said the worthy smith, quietly, as he put down his hammer out of respect for the King's name. "Well, and what does His Majesty, King George II., desire with John Stich, the blacksmith, eh?"

"Not with you alone, John Stich," replied the Corporal. "This is an Act of Parliament and concerns all loyal subjects of the King. Who be yon lad?" he asked, carelessly nodding towards the young man at the bellows.

"My nephew Jim, out o' Nottingham," replied John Stich, quietly, "my sister Hannah's child. You recollect her, Corporal? She was in service with my Lord Exeter up at Derby."

"Oh, aye! Mistress Hannah Stich, to be sure! I didn't know she had such a fine lad of her own," commented the Corporal, as the young man straightened his tall figure and looked him fearlessly in the face.

"Lads grow up fast enough, don't they, Corporal?" laughed honest Stich, pleasantly; "but come, let's hear His Majesty's Proclamation since you've got to read it. But you see I'm very busy and..."

"Nay, 'tis my duty, John Stich, 'in every homestead in Derbyshire' 'tis to be read, so says this Act of Parliament. You might have saved this trouble had you come down to the cross-roads just now."

"I was busy," remarked John Stich, drily, and the Corporal began to read: —

"It having come to the knowledge of His Majesty's Parliament that certain subjects of the King have lately raised the standard of rebellion, setting up the Pretender, Charles Edward Stuart, above the King's most lawful Majesty, it is hereby enacted that these persons are guilty of high treason and by the laws of the kingdom are therefore condemned to death. It is further enacted that it is unlawful for any loyal subject of the King to shelter or harbour, clothe or feed any such persons who are vile traitors and rebels to their King and country; and that any subject of His Majesty who kills such a traitor or rebel doth thereby commit an act of justice and loyalty, for which he may be rewarded by the sum of twenty guineas."

There was a pause when the Corporal had finished reading. John Stich was leaning upon his hammer, the young man once more busied himself with the bellows. Outside, the clearing shower of September rain began pattering upon the thatched roof of the forge.

"Well," said John Stich at last, as the Corporal put the heavy parchment away in his wallet. "Well, and are you going to tell us who are those persons, Corporal, whom our village lads are told to murder by Act of Parliament? How shall we know a rebel ... and shoot him ... when we see one?"

"There were forty persons down on the list a few weeks ago, persons who were known to be in hiding in Derbyshire," said the young soldier, "but..."

"Well, what's your 'but,' Corporal? There were forty persons whom 'twas lawful to murder a few weeks ago... What of them?"

"They have been caught and hanged, most of them," replied the soldier, quietly.

"Jim, lad, mind that fire," commented John Stich, turning to his "nephew out o' Nottingham," for the latter was staring with glowing eyes and quivering lips at the Corporal, who, not noticing him, continued carelessly, —

"There was Lord Lovat now, you must have heard of him, John Stich, he was beheaded a few days ago, and so was Lord Kilmarnock ... they were lords, you see, and had a headsman all to themselves on Tower Hill, that's up in London: some lesser folk have been hanged, and now there are only three rebels at large, and there are twenty guineas waiting for anyone who will bring the head of one of them to the nearest magistrate."

The smith grunted. "Well, and who are they?" he asked roughly.

"Sir Andrew Macdonald up from Tweedside, then Squire Fairfield, you'd mind him, John Stich, over Staffordshire way."

"Aye, aye, I mind him well enough. His mother was a Papist and he clung to the Stuart cause ... young man, too, and hiding for his life... Well, and who else?"

"The young Earl of Stretton."

"What! him from Stretton Hall?" said John Stich in open astonishment. "Jim, lad," he added sternly, "thou art a clumsy fool."

The young man had started involuntarily at sound of the last name mentioned by the Corporal; and the bellows which he had tried to wield fell with a clatter on the floor.

"Be gy! but an Act of Parliament can make thee a lawful assassin, it seems," added honest John, with a laugh, "but let me perish if it can make thee a good smith. What think you, Master Corporal?"

"Odd's life! the lad is too soft-hearted mayhap! Our Derbyshire lads haven't much sense in their heads, have they?"

"Well, you mind the saying, Corporal, 'Derbyshire born and Derbyshire bred...' eh?"

"Strong i' the arm and weak i' th' head," laughed the soldier, concluding the apt quotation. "That's just it. Odd's buds! they want some sense. What's a rebel or a traitor but vermin, eh? and don't we kill vermin all of us, and don't call it murder either – what?"

He laughed pleasantly and carelessly and tapped the side of his wallet where rested His Majesty's Proclamation. He was a young soldier, nothing more, attentive to duty, ready to obey, neither willing nor allowed to reason for himself. He had been taught that rebels and traitors were vermin ... egad! vermin they were, and as such must be got rid of for the sake of the rest of the kingdom and the safety of His Majesty the King.

John Stich made no comment on the Corporal's profession of faith.

"We'll talk about all that some other time, Corporal," he said at last, "but I am busy now, you see..."

"No offence, friend Stich... Odd's life, duty you know, John, duty, eh? His Majesty's orders! and I had them from the Captain, who had them from the Duke of Cumberland himself. So you mind the Act, friend!"

"Aye! I mind it well enough."

"Everyone knows *you* to be a loyal subject of King George," added the Corporal in conciliatory tones, for John was a power in the district, "and I'm sure your nephew is the same, but duty is duty, and no offence meant."

"That's right enough, Corporal," said John Stich, impatiently.

"So good-morrow to you, John Stich."

"Good-morrow."

The Corporal nodded to the young man, then turned on his heel and presently his voice was heard ringing out the word of command, —

"Attention! – Right turn – Quick march!"

John Stich and the young man watched the half-dozen red-coated figures as they turned to skirt the cottage: the dull thud of their feet quickly dying away, as they wound their way slowly up the muddy path which leads across the Heath to Aldwark village.

CHAPTER III

THE FUGITIVE

Inside the forge all was still, whilst the last of the muffled sounds died away in the distance. John Stich had not resumed work. It was his turn now to stare moodily before him.

The young man had thrown the bellows aside, and was pacing the rough earthen floor of the forge like some caged animal.

"Tracked!" he murmured at last between clenched teeth, "tracked like some wild beast! perhaps shot anon like a dangerous cur behind a hedge!"

He sighed a long and bitter sigh, full of sorrow, anxiety, disappointment. It had come to this then! His name among the others – the traitors, the rebels! and he an innocent man!

"Nay, my lord!" said the smith, quietly, "not while John Stich owns a roof that can shelter you."

The young man paused in his feverish walk; a look of gentleness and gratitude softened the care-worn expression on his face: with a boyish gesture he threw back the fair hair which fell in curly profusion over his forehead, and with a frank and winning grace he sought and grasped the worthy smith's rough brown hand.

"Honest Stich!" he said at last, whilst his voice shook a little as he spoke, "and to think that I cannot even reward your devotion!"

"Nay, my lord," retorted John Stich, drawing up his burly figure to its full height, "don't talk of reward. I would gladly give my life for you and your family."

And this was no idle talk. John Stich meant every word he said. Honest, kind, simple-hearted John! he loved those to whom he owed everything, loved them with all the devotion of his strong, faithful nature.

The late Lord Stretton had brought him up, cared for him, given him a trade, and set him up in the cottage and forge at the cross-roads, and honest Stich felt that as everything that was good in life had come from my lord and his family, so everything he could give should be theirs in return.

"Ah! I fear me," sighed the young man, "that it is your life you risk now by sheltering me."

Yet it was all such a horrible mistake.

Philip James Gascoyne, eleventh Earl of Stretton, was at this time not twenty-one years of age. There is that fine portrait of him at Brassing Hall painted by Hogarth just before this time. The artist has well caught the proud features, the fine blue eyes, the boyish, curly head, which have been the characteristics of the Gascoynes for many generations. He has also succeeded in indicating the sensitiveness of the mouth, that somewhat feminine turn of the lips, that all too-rounded curve of the chin and jaw, which perhaps robs the handsome face of its virile manliness. There certainly is a look of indecision, of weakness of will about the lower part of the face, but it is so frank, so young, so *insouciant*, that it wins all hearts, even if it does not captivate the judgment.

Of course, when he was very young, his sympathies went out to the Stuart cause. Had not the Gascoynes suffered and died for Charles Stuart but a hundred years ago? Why the change? Why this allegiance to an alien dynasty, to a king who spoke the language of his subjects with a foreign accent?

His father, the late Lord Stretton, a contented, unargumentative British nobleman of the eighteenth century, had not thought it worth his while to explain to the growing lad the religious and political questions involved in the upholding of this foreign dynasty. Perhaps he did not understand them altogether himself. The family motto is "Pour le Roi." So the Gascoynes fought for a Stuart when he was King, and against him when he was a Pretender, and old Lord Stretton expected his children to reverence the family motto, and to have no opinions of their own.

And yet to the hearts of many the Stuart cause made a strong appeal. From Scotland came the fame of the "bonnie Prince" who won all hearts where'er he went. Philip was young, his father's discipline was irksome, he had some friends among the Highland lords: and while his father lived

there had as yet been no occasion in the English Midlands to do anything very daring for the Stuart Pretender.

When the Earl of Stretton died, Philip, a mere boy then, succeeded to title and estates. In the first flush of new duties and new responsibilities his old enthusiasm remained half forgotten. As a peer of the realm he had registered his allegiance to King George, and with his youthful romantic nature all afire, he clung to that new oath of his, idealised it and loyally resisted the blandishments and lures held out to him from Scotland and from France.

Then came the news that Charles Edward, backed by French money and French influence, would march upon London and would stop at Derby to rally round his standard his friends in the Midlands.

Young Lord Stretton, torn between memories of his boyhood and the duties of his new position, feared to be inveigled into breaking his allegiance to King George. The malevolent fairy who at his birth had given him that weak mouth and softly rounded chin, had stamped his worst characteristic on the young handsome face. Philip's one hope at this juncture was to flee from temptation; he knew that Charles Edward, remembering his past ardour, would demand his help and his adherence, and that he, Philip, might be powerless to refuse.

So he fled from the county: despising himself as a coward, yet boyishly clinging to the idea that he would keep the oath he had sworn to King George. He wished to put miles of country between himself and the possible breaking of that oath, the possible yielding to the "bonnie Prince" whom none could resist. He left his sister, Lady Patience, at Stretton Hall, well cared for by old retainers, and he, a loyal subject to his King, became a fugitive.

Then came the catastrophe: that miserable retreat from Derby; the bedraggled remains of a disappointed army; finally Culloden and complete disaster; King George's soldiers scouring the country for rebels, the bills of attainder, the quick trials and swift executions.

Soon the suspicion grew into certainty that the fugitive Earl of Stretton was one of the Pretender's foremost adherents. On his weary way from Derby Prince Charles Edward had asked and obtained a night's shelter at Stretton Hall. When Philip tried to communicate with his sister, and to return to his home, he found that she was watched, and that he was himself attainted by Act of Parliament.

Yet he felt himself guiltless and loyal. He *was* guiltless and loyal: how his name came to be included in the list of rebels was still a mystery to him: someone must have lodged sworn information against him. But who? – Surely not his old friends – the adherents of Charles Edward – out of revenge for his half-heartedness?

In the meanwhile, he, a mere lad, became an outcast, condemned to death by Act of Parliament. Presently all might be cleared, all would be well, but for the moment he was like a wild beast, hiding in hedges and ditches, with his life at the mercy of any grasping Judas willing to sell his fellow-creature for a few guineas.

It was horrible! horrible! Philip vainly tried all the day to rouse himself from his morbid reverie. At intervals he would grasp the kind smith's hand and mutter anxiously, —

"My letter to my sister, John? – You are sure she had it?"

And patient John would repeat a dozen times the day, —

"I am quite sure, my lord."

But since the Corporal's visit Philip's mood had become more feverish.

"My letter," he repeated, "has Patience had my letter? Why doesn't she come?"

And spite of John's entreaties he would go to the entrance which faced the lonely Heath, and with burning eyes look out across the wilderness of furze and bracken towards that distant horizon where lay his home, where waited his patient, loving sister.

"I beg you, my lord, come away from the door, it isn't safe, not really safe," urged John Stich again and again.

"Then why will you not tell me who took my letter to Stretton Hall?" said the boy with feverish impatience.

"My lord..."

"Some stupid dolt mayhap, who has lost his way ... or ... perchance betrayed me..."

"My lord," pleaded the smith, "have I not sworn that your letter went by hands as faithful, as trusty as my own?"

"But I'll not rest an you do not tell me who took it. I wish to know," he added with that sudden look of command which all the Strettons have worn for many generations past.

The old habitual deference of the retainer for his lord was strong in the heart of John. He yielded.

"Nay, my lord, an you'll not be satisfied," he said with a sigh, "I'll tell you, though Heaven knows that his safety is as dear to me as yours – both dearer than my own."

"Well, who was it?" asked the young man, eagerly.

"I entrusted your letter for Lady Patience to Beau Brocade, the highwayman – "

In a moment Philip was on his feet: danger, amazement, horror, robbed him of speech for a few seconds, but the next he had gripped the smith's arm and like a furious, thoughtless, unreasoning child, he gasped, —

"Beau Brocade!! ... the highwayman!!! ... My life, my honour to a highwayman!!! Are you mad or drunk, John Stich?"

"Neither, my lord," said John with great respect, but looking the young man fearlessly in the face. "You don't know Beau Brocade, and there are no safer hands than his. He knows every inch of the Moor and fears neither man nor devil."

Touched in spite of himself by the smith's earnestness, Philip's wrath abated somewhat; still he seemed dazed, not understanding, vaguely scenting danger, or treachery.

"But a highwayman!" he repeated mechanically.

"Aye! and a gentleman!" retorted John with quiet conviction. "A gentleman if ever there was one! Aye! and not the only one who has ta'en to the road these hard times," he added under his breath.

"But a thief, John! A man who might sell my letter, betray my whereabouts!..."

"A man, my lord, who would die in torture sooner than do that."

The smith's quiet and earnest conviction seemed to chase away the last vestige of Philip's wrath. Still he seemed unconvinced.

"A hero of romance, John, this highwayman of yours," he laughed bitterly.

Honest John scratched the back of his curly black head.

"Noa!" he said, somewhat puzzled. "I know nought about that or what's a ... a hero of romance. But I do know that Beau Brocade is a friend of the poor, and that our village lads won't lay their hands on him, even if they could. No! not though the Government have offered a hundred guineas as the price of his head."

"Five times the value of mine, it seems," said Philip with a sigh. "But," he added, with a sudden return to feverish anxiety, "if he was caught last night, with my letter in his hands..."

"Caught!!! Beau Brocade caught!" laughed John Stich, "nay, all the soldiers of the Duke of Cumberland's army couldn't do that, my lord! Besides, I know he wasn't caught. I saw him on his chestnut horse just before the Corporal came. I heard him laughing, at the red coats, maybe. Nay! my lord, I beg you have no fear, your letter is in her ladyship's hand now, I'll lay my life on that."

"I had to trust someone, my lord," he said after awhile, as Lord Stretton once more relapsed into gloomy silence. "I could do nothing for your lordship single-handed, and you wanted that letter to reach her ladyship. I scarce knew what to do. But I did know I could trust Beau Brocade, and your secret is as safe with him as it is with me."

Philip sighed wearily.

"Ah, well! I'll believe it all, friend John. I'll trust you and your friend, and be grateful to you both: have no fear of that! Who am I but a wretched creature, whom any rascal may shoot by Act of Parliament."

But John Stich had come to the end of his power of argument. Never a man of many words, he had only become voluble when speaking of his friend. Philip tried to look cheerful and convinced, but he was chafing under this enforced inactivity and the dark, close atmosphere of the forge.

He had spent two days under the smith's roof and time seemed to creep with lead-weighted wings: yet every sound, every strange footstep, made his nerves quiver with morbid apprehension, and even now at sound of a tremulous voice from the road, shrank, moody and impatient, into corner of the hut.

CHAPTER IV

JOCK MIGGS, THE SHEPHERD

"Be you at home, Master Stich?"

A curious, wizened little figure stood in the doorway peering cautiously into the forge.

In a moment John Stich was on the alert.

"Sh!" he whispered quickly, "have no fear, my lord, 'tis only some fool from the village."

"Did ye say ye baint at home, Master Stich?" queried the same tremulous voice again. "I didn't quite hear ye."

"Yes, yes, I'm here all right, Jock Miggs," said the smith, heartily. "Come in!"

Jock Miggs came in, making as little noise, and taking up as little room as possible. Dressed in a well-worn smock and shabby corduroy breeches, he had a curious shrunken, timid air about his whole personality, as he removed his soft felt hat and began scratching his scanty tow-coloured locks: he was a youngish man too, probably not much more than thirty, yet his brown face was a mass of ruts and wrinkles like a furrowed path on Brassing Moor.

"Morning, Mr Stich ... morning," he said with a certain air of vagueness and apology, as with obvious admiration he stopped to watch the broad back of the smith and his strong arms wielding the heavy hammer.

"Morning, Miggs," retorted John, not looking up from his work, "how's the old woman?"

"I dunno, Mr Stich," replied Miggs, with a dubious shake of the head. "Badly, I expect' ... same as yesterday," he added in a more cheerful spirit.

"Why! what's the matter?"

"I dunno, Mr Stich, that there's anything the matter," explained Jock Miggs with slow and sad deliberation, "but she's dead ... same as yesterday."

Involuntarily Philip laughed at the quaint, fatalistic statement.

"Hello!" said Miggs, looking at him with the same apathetic wonder, "who be yon lad?"

"That's my nephew Jim, out o' Nottingham," said John, "come to give me a hand."

"Morning, lad," piped Miggs, in his high treble, as he extended a wrinkled, bony hand to Stretton.

"Lud, John Stich," he exclaimed, "any one'd know he was one o' your family from the muscle he's got."

And gently, meditatively, he rubbed one shrivelled hand against the other, looking with awe at the fine figure of a man before him.

"A banging lad your nephew too," he added with a chuckle; "he'll be turning the heads of all the girls this side o' Brassington, maybe."

"Oh! I'll warrant he's got a sweetheart at home, eh, Jim lad? – or maybe more than one. But what brings ye here this day, friend Miggs?"

The wizened little face assumed a puzzled expression.

"I dunno..." he said vaguely, "maybe I wanted to tell ye about the soldiers I seed at the Royal George over Brassington way."

"What about 'em, Miggs?"

"I dunno... I see a corporal and lots of fellers in red ... some say there's more o' them ... I dunno."

"Ha!" said Stich, carelessly, "What are they after?"

"I dunno," commented Miggs, imperturbably. "Some say they're after that chap Beau Brocade. There was a coach stopped on the Heath 'gain last night. Fifty guineas he took out of it, he did..." And Jock Miggs chuckled feebly with apparent but irresponsible delight. "Some folk say it were Sir

Humphrey Challoner's coach over from Hartington, and no one's going to break their hearts over that! he! he! he! ... but *I* dunno," he added with sudden frightened vagueness.

"Be they cavalry soldiers over at the Royal George, Miggs?" asked John.

"*I* dunno ... I seed no horses ... looks more like foot soldiers ... but *I* dunno. The Corporal he read out something just now about our getting twenty guineas if we shoot one o' them rebels. I'd be mighty glad to get twenty guineas, Master Stich," he said reflectively, "but *I* dunno as how I could handle a musket rightly ... and folks say them traitors are mighty desperate fellows ... but *I* dunno..."

Then with sudden resolution Jock Miggs turned to the doorway.

"Morning, Master Stich," he said decisively. "Morning, lad! ... morning."

"Morning, Miggs."

However, it seemed that Jock Miggs's visit to the forge was not so purposeless as it at first appeared.

"He! he! he!" he chuckled, as if suddenly recollecting his errand. "I'd almost forgot why I came. Farmer Crabtree wanted to know, Master Stich, if you'm got the wether's collar mended yet?"

"Oh, yes, to be sure," replied the smith, pointing to a rough bench on which lay a number of metal articles. "You'll find it on that there bench, Jock. Farmer Crabtree sold his sheep yet?"

Jock toddled up to the bench and picked up the wether's collar.

"Noa!" he muttered, "not yet, worse luck! And his temper is that hot! So don't 'ee charge him too much for the collar, Master Stich, or it's me that'll have to suffer."

And Miggs rubbed his shoulder significantly. Stich laughed. Philip himself, in spite of his anxiety, could not help being amused at the quaint figure of the little shepherd with his wizened face and gentle, vaguely fatalistic manner.

Thus it was that no one in the forge had perceived the patter of small feet on the mud outside, and when Jock Miggs, with more elaborate "Mornings" and final leave-takings, once more reached the doorway, he came in violent collision with a short, be-cloaked and closely-hooded figure that was picking its way on very small, very high-heeled shoes, through the maze of puddles which guarded the entrance to the forge.

The impact sent Jock Miggs, scared and apologetic, stumbling in one direction, whilst the grey hood flew off the head of its wearer and disclosed in the setting of its shell-pink lining a merry, pretty, impudent little face, with brown eyes sparkling and red lips pouting in obvious irritation.

"Lud, man!" said the dainty young damsel, withering the unfortunate shepherd with a scornful glance, "why don't you look where you're going?"

"*I* dunno," replied Jock Miggs, with his usual humble vagueness. "Morning, miss ... morning, Master Stich ... morning."

And still scared, still in obvious apology for his existence, he pulled at his forelock, re-adjusted his hat over his yellow curls, took his final leave, and presently began to wend his way slowly back towards the Heath.

But within the forge, at first bound of the young girl's voice, Stretton had started in uncontrollable excitement.

"Betty!" he whispered, eagerly clutching John Stich's arm.

"Aye! aye!" replied the cautious smith, "but I beg you, my lord, keep in the background until I find out if all is safe."

Mistress Betty's saucy brown eyes followed Jock Miggs's quaint, retreating figure.

"Well! you're a pretty bit of sheep's wool, ain't ye?" she shouted after him, with a laugh and a shrug of her plump shoulders.

Then she peered into the forge.

"Lud love you, Master Stich!" she said, "how goes it with you?"

In obedience to counsels of prudence, Stretton had retired into the remote corner of the forge. John Stich too was masking the entrance with his burly figure.

"All the better, Mistress Betty," he said, "for a sight of your pretty face."

He had become very red, had honest John, and his rough manner seemed completely to have deserted him. In fact, not to put too fine a point upon it, the worthy smith looked distinctly shy and sheepish.

She looked up at him and laughed a pleased, coquettish little laugh, the laugh of a woman who has oft been told that she is pretty, and has not tired of the hearing. John Stich, moreover, was so big and burly, folks called him hard and rough, and it vastly entertained the young damsel to see him standing there before her, as awkward and uncomfortable as Jock Miggs himself.

"Am I not to step inside, Master Stich?" she asked.

"Yes, yes, Mistress Betty," murmured John, who seemed to have lost himself in admiration of a pair of tiny buckled shoes muddy to the ankles – such ankles! – which showed to great advantage beneath Betty's short green kirtle.

An angry, impatient movement behind him, however, quickly recalled his scattered senses.

"Did her ladyship receive a letter, mistress?" he asked eagerly.

"Oh, yes! a stranger brought it," replied Betty, with a pout, for she preferred John's mute appreciation of her small person to his interest in other matters. However, the demon of mischief no doubt whispered something in her ear for the further undoing of the worthy smith, for she put on a demure, mysterious little air, turned up her brown eyes, sighed with affectation, and murmured ecstatically, —

"Oh! such a stranger! the fine eyes of him, Master Stich! and such an air, and oh!" added little madam with unction, "such clothes!"

But though no doubt all these fine airs and graces wrought deadly havoc in poor John's heart, he concealed it well enough under a show of eager impatience.

"Yes! yes! the stranger," he said, casting a furtive glance behind him, "he gave you a letter for my lady?"

"La! you needn't be in such a hurry, Master Stich!" retorted Mistress Betty, adding with all the artifice of which she was capable, "the stranger wasn't."

But this was too much for John. There had been such a wealth of meaning in Betty's brown eyes.

"Oh! he wasn't? was he?" he asked with a jealous frown, "and pray what had he to say to you? There was no message except the letter."

But the demon of mischief was satisfied and Betty was disposed to be kind, even if slightly mysterious.

"Oh, never mind!" she rejoined archly, "he gave me a letter which I gave to my lady. That was early this morning."

"Well? ... and?"

But matters were progressing too slowly at anyrate for one feverish, anxious heart. Philip had tried to hold himself in check, though he was literally hanging on pretty Mistress Betty's lips. Now he could contain himself no longer. Lady Patience had had his letter. The mysterious highwayman had not failed in his trust, and the news Betty had brought meant life or death to him.

Throwing prudence to the winds, he pushed John Stich aside, and seizing the young girl by the wrist, he asked excitedly, —

"Yes? this morning, Betty? ... then ... then ... what did her ladyship do?"

Betty was frightened, and like a child was ready to drown her fright in tears. She had not recognised my lord in those dirty clothes.

"Don't you know me, Betty?" asked Philip, a little more quietly.

Betty cast a timid glance at the two men before her, and smiled through the coming tears.

"Of course, my lord ... I ... " she murmured shyly.

"'Tis my nephew Jim out o' Nottingham, mistress," said John, sternly, "try and remember that: and now tell us what did her ladyship do?"

"She had the horses put to, not an hour after the stranger had been. Thomas is driving and Timothy is our only other escort. But we've not drawn rein since we left the Hall!"

"Yes! yes!" came from two pairs of eager lips.

"And my lady stopped the coach about two hundred yards from here," continued Betty with great volubility, "and she told me to run on here, to see that the coast was clear. She knew I could find my way, and she wouldn't trust Timothy as she trusts me," added the young girl with a pretty touch of pride.

"But where is she, Betty? where is she?"

Betty pointed to the clump of firs, which stood like ghostly sentinels on the crest of the hill, just where the road turns sharply to the east.

"Just beyond those trees, my lord, and she made Timothy watch until I came round the bend and in sight of the forge. But la! the mud on the roads! 'tis fit to drown you."

But already John Stich was outside, beckoning to Mistress Betty.

"Come, mistress, quick!" he said excitedly, "her ladyship must be nigh crazy with impatience. By your leave, my lord, I'll help Mistress Betty on her way, and I'll keep this place in sight. I'll go no further..."

"Yes, yes," rejoined Philip, feverishly, "go, go, fly if you can! I'll be safe! I'll not show myself. God give you both wings, for I'll not live now till I see my sister."

Eager, boyish, full of wild gaiety, he seemed to have thrown off his morbid anxiety as he would a mantle. He even laughed whole-heartedly as he watched Betty, with many airs and graces, "Luds!" and "I vows!" making great pretence at being unable to walk in the mud, and leaning heavily on honest Stich's arm.

He watched them as they picked their way up the so-called road, a perfect quagmire after the heavy September rains.

The air seemed so different now, the Heath smelt good, there was vigour and life in the keen nor'-wester; how green the bracken looked, and how harmoniously it seemed to blend with the purple shoots of the bramble laden with ripening fruit! how delicate the more tender green of the gorse, and there that vivid patch of mauve, the first glimpse of opening heather! the heavy clouds too were rolling away; the September sun was going to have his own way after all and spread his kingdom of blue and gold over the distant Derbyshire hills.

Hope had come like the divine magician to chase away all that was grey and sad and dreary, and Hope had met Youth and shaken him by the hand: they are such friends, such inseparable companions, these two!

What mattered it that some few yards away the old gallows, like some eerie witch, still spread its gaunt arm over that fluttering bit of parchment: the Proclamation of His Majesty's Parliament? What though it spoke of death, of treachery, of bills of attainder, of Tower Hill?

Did not the good nor'-wester from the Moor flutter round it, and in wanton frolic attack it now with madcap fury and a shrill whistle, and now with a long-drawn-out sigh. The parchment resisted with vigour, it bore the onslaught of the wind twice, thrice, and once again. But the nor'-wester was not to be outdone, and again it renewed the attack, took the parchment by the corner, pulled and twisted at it, until at last with one terrific blast it tore the Royal Proclamation off the old gallows, and sent it whirling in a mad gallop across the Moor, far, very far away on to Derby, to London, to the place where all winds go.

CHAPTER V

"THERE'S NONE LIKE HER, NONE!"

There was something more than ordinary affection between Philip, Earl of Stretton, and his sister, Lady Patience Gascoyne. Those who knew them in the days of their happiness said they seemed more like lovers than brother and sister, so tender, so true was their clinging devotion to one another.

But those who knew them both intimately said that they were more like mother and son together; though Philip was only a year or two younger than Patience, she had all a mother's fondness, a mother's indulgence and sweet pity for him, he all a son's deference, a son's trust in her.

Even now, as he instinctively felt her dear presence nigh, hope took a more firm, more lasting hold upon him. He knew that she would act wisely and prudently for him. For the first time for many days and weeks he felt safe, less morbidly afraid of treachery, more ready to fight adverse fate.

The heavy coach came lumbering along the quaggy road, the old coachman's "Whoa! whoa! there! there!" as he tried to encourage his horses in the heavy task of pulling the cumbersome vehicle through the morass, sounded like sweetest music in Philip's ear.

He did not dare go to meet them, but he watched the coach as it drew nearer and nearer, very slowly, the horses going step by step urged on by the coachman and by Timothy, who rode close at their heads, spurring them with whip and kind words, the wheels creaking as they slowly turned on their mud-laden axles.

Thus Patience had travelled since dawn, ever since the stranger had brought her the letter which told her that her brother had succeeded in reaching this secluded corner of Derbyshire, and was now in hiding with faithful John Stich, waiting for her guidance and help to establish his innocence.

Leaning back against the cushions of the coach, she had sat with eyes closed and hands tightly clutched. Anxious, wearied, at times hopeful, she had borne the terrible fatigue of this lumbering journey from Stretton Hall, along the unmade roads of Brassing Moor, with all the fortitude the Gascoynes had always shown for any cause they had at heart.

At the cross-roads Thomas, the driver, brought his horses to a standstill. Already, as the coach had passed some fifty yards from the forge, Patience had leaned out of the window trying to get a glimpse of the dear face which she knew would be on the lookout for her.

John Stich had escorted Betty as far as the bend in the road, and within sight of Timothy waiting some hundred yards further on, then he had retraced his steps, and was now back at the cross-roads ready to help Lady Patience to alight.

"Let the coach wait here," she said to the driver, "we may sleep at Wirksworth to-night."

"Ah! my good Stich," she added, grasping the smith's hand eagerly, "my brother, how is he?"

"All the better since he knows your ladyship has come," replied Stich.

A few moments later brother and sister were locked in each other's arms.

"My sweet sister! My dear, dear Patience!" was all Philip could say at first.

But she placed one hand on his shoulder and with a gentle motherly gesture brushed with the other the unruly curls from the white, moist forehead. He looked haggard and careworn, although his eyes now gleamed with feverish hope, and hers, in spite of herself, began to fill with tears.

"Dear, dear one," she murmured, trying to look cheerful, to push back the tears. All would be well now that she could get to him, that they could talk things over, that she could *do* something for him and with him, instead of sitting – weary and inactive – alone at Stretton Hall, without news, a prey to devouring anxiety.

"That awful Proclamation," he said at last – "you have heard of it?"

"Aye!" she replied sadly, "even before you did, I think. Sir Humphrey Challoner sent a courier across to tell me of it."

"And my name amongst those attainted by Act of Parliament!"

She nodded, her lips were quivering, and she would not break down, now that he needed all her courage as well as his own.

"But I am innocent, dear," he said, taking both her tiny hands in his own, and looking firmly, steadfastly into her face. "You believe me, don't you?"

"Of course, Philip, I believe you. But it is all so hard, so horrible, and 'tis Heaven alone who knows which was the just cause."

"There is no doubt as to which was the stronger cause, at anyrate in England," said Stretton, with some bitterness. "Charles Edward was very ill-advised to cross the border at all, and in the Midlands no one cares about the Stuarts now. But that's all ancient history," he added with a weary sigh, "it's no use dwelling over all the wretched mistakes that were committed last year, 'tis only the misery that has abided until now."

"Why did you run away, Philip?" she asked.

"Because I was a fool ... and a coward," he added, while a blush of shame darkened his young Saxon face.

"No, no..."

"I thought if I remained at Stretton Charles Edward would demand my help ... and you know," he said with a quaint boyish smile, "I was never very good at saying 'Nay!' I knew they would persuade me. Lovat and Kilmarnock were such friends, and..."

"So you preferred to run away?"

"It was cowardly, wasn't it?"

"I am afraid it was," she said reluctantly, her tenderness and her conviction fighting an even battle in her heart. "But why wouldn't you tell me, dear?"

"Because I was a fool," he said, cursing himself for that same folly. "You were away in London just then, you remember?"

She nodded.

"And there was no one to advise me, except Challoner."

"Sir Humphrey? Then it was he?..."

Philip looked at her in astonishment. There was such a strange quiver in her voice; a note of deep anxiety, of almost hysterical alarm. But she checked herself quickly, and said more calmly, —

"What did Sir Humphrey Challoner advise you to do?"

"He said that Charles Edward would surely persuade me to join his standard, that he would demand shelter at Stretton Hall, and claim my allegiance."

"Yes, yes?"

"And he thought that it would be wiser for me to put two or three counties between myself and the temptation of becoming a rebel."

"He thought!..."

There was a world of bitter contempt in those two words she uttered. Even Philip, absorbed as he was in his own affairs, could not fail to notice it.

"Challoner has always been my friend," he said almost reproachfully. "I fancy, little sister," he added with his boyish smile, "that it rests with you that he should become my brother."

"Hush, dear, don't speak of that."

"Why not?"

She did not reply, and there was a moment's silence between them. She was evidently hesitating whether to tell him of the fears, the suspicions which the mention of Sir Humphrey Challoner's name had aroused in her heart, or to leave the subject alone. At last she said quite gently, —

"But when I came home, dear, and found you had left the Hall without a message, without a word for me, why did you not tell me then?"

The boy hung his head. He felt the tender reproach, and there was nothing to be said.

"I would have stood by you," she continued softly. "I think I might have helped you. There was no disgrace in refusing to join a doomed cause, and you were a mere child when you made friends with Lovat."

"I know all that now, dear," he said with some impatience. "Heaven knows I am paying dearly enough for my cowardice and my folly. But even now I cannot understand how my name became mixed up with those of the rebels. Somebody must have sworn false information against me. But who? I haven't an enemy in the world, have I, dear?"

"No, no," she said quickly, but even as she spoke the look of involuntary alarm in her face belied the assurance of her lips.

But this was not the moment to add to his anxiety by futile, worrying conjectures. He had sent for her because he wanted her, and she was here to do for him, to help and support him in every way that her strength of will and her energy would dictate.

"You sent for me, Philip," she said with a cheerful, hopeful smile.

Her look seemed to put fresh life into his veins. In a moment he tried to conquer his despondency, and with a quick gesture he tore open the rough, woollen shirt he wore, and from beneath it drew a packet of letters. Not only his hand now, but his whole figure seemed to quiver with excitement as he gazed at this packet with glowing eyes.

"These letters, dear," he said in a whisper, "are my one hope of safety. They have not left my body day or night ever since I first understood my position and realised my danger, and now, with them, I place my life in your hands."

"Yes, Philip?"

"They prove my innocence," he continued, as nervously he pulled at the string that held the letters together. "Here is one from Lovat," he added, handing one of these to Patience, "read it, dear, quickly. You will see he begs me to join the Pretender's standard. Here's another from Kilmarnock – that was after the retreat from Derby – he upbraids me for holding aloof. I was in hiding at Nottingham then, but *they* knew where I was, and would not leave me alone. They would have followed me if they could. And here ... better still ... is one from Charles Edward himself, just before he fled to France, calling me a traitor for my loyalty to King George."

Feverishly he tore open letter after letter, thrusting them into her hand, scanning them with burning, eager eyes. She took them from him one by one, glanced at them, then quietly folded each precious piece of paper, and tied the packet together again. Her hand did not shake, but beneath her cloak she pressed the letters to her heart, the letters that meant the safety of her dear one's life.

"Oh! if I had known all this sooner!" she sighed involuntarily.

But that was the only reproach that escaped her lips for his want of confidence in her.

"I nearly yielded to Lovat's letter," said the boy, hesitatingly.

"I know, I know, dear," she said with an infinity of indulgence in her gentle smile. "We won't speak of the past any more. Now let us arrange the future."

He tried to master his excitement, throwing off with an effort of will his feverishness and his morbid self-condemnation.

He had done a foolish and a cowardly thing; he knew that well enough. Fate had dealt him one of those cruel blows with which she sometimes strikes the venial offender, letting so often the more hardened criminal go scatheless.

For months now Philip had been a fugitive, disguised in rough clothes, hiding in barns and inns of doubtful fame, knowing no one whom he could really trust, to whom he dared disclose his place of temporary refuge, or confide a message for his sister. Treachery was in the air; he suspected everyone. The bill of attainder had condemned so many men to death, and rebel-hunting and swift executions were in that year of grace the order of the day.

"I could do nothing without you, dear," he said more quietly. "I must hide now like a hunted beast, and must be grateful for the sheltering roof of honest Stich. I have been branded as a traitor by

Act of Parliament, my life is forfeit, and it is even a crime for any man to give me food and shelter. The lowest footpad who haunts the Moor has the right to shoot me like a mad dog."

"Don't! don't, dear!" she pleaded.

"I only wished you to understand that I was not such an abject coward as I seemed. I could not get to you or reach the Hall."

"I quite understood that, dear. Now, tell me, you wish me to take these letters to London?"

"At once. The sooner they are laid before the King and Council the better. I must get to the fountain head as quickly as possible. Once I am caught they will give me no chance of proving my innocence. I have been tried by Act of Parliament, found guilty and condemned to death. You realise that, dear, don't you?"

"Yes, Philip, I do," she replied very quietly.

"Once in London, who do you think can best help you?"

"Lady Edbrooke, of course. Her husband has just been appointed equerry to the King."

"Ah! that's well! Aunt Charlotte was always fond of me. She'll be kind to you, I know."

"I think you should write to her. I'd take that letter too."

"When can you start?"

"Not for a few hours unfortunately. The horses must be put up. We have been on the road since dawn."

They were both quite calm now, and discussed these few details as if life or death were not the outcome of the journey.

Patience was glad to see that the boy had entirely shaken off the almost hysterical horror he had of his unfortunate position.

They were suddenly interrupted by John Stich's cautious voice at the entrance of the shed.

"Your ladyship's pardon," said John, respectfully, "but there's a coach coming up the road from Hartington way. I thought perhaps it might be more prudent..."

"Hartington!"

Brother and sister had uttered the exclamation simultaneously. He in astonishment, she in obvious alarm.

"Who can it be, John, think you?" she asked with quivering lips.

"Well, it couldn't very well be anyone except Sir Humphrey Challoner, my lady. No one else'd have occasion to come down these God-forsaken roads. But they are some way off yet," he added reassuringly, "I saw them first on the crest of the further hill. Maybe his Honour is on his way to Derby."

Patience was trying to conquer her agitation, but it was her turn now to seem nervous and excited.

"Oh! I didn't want him to find me here!" she said quickly. "I ... I mistrust that man, Philip ... foolishly perhaps, and ... if he sees me ... he might guess ... he might suspect..."

"Nay, my lady, there's not much fear of that, craving your pardon," hazarded John Stich, cheerfully. "If 'tis Sir Humphrey 'twill take his driver some time yet to walk down the incline, and then up again to the cross-roads. 'Tis a mile and a half for sure, and the horses'll have to go foot pace. There's plenty of time for your ladyship to be well on your way before they get here."

She felt reassured evidently, for she said more calmly, —

"I'll have to put up somewhere, John, for a few hours, for the sake of the horses. Where had that best be?"

"Up at Aldwark, I should say, my lady, at the Moorhen."

"Perhaps I could get fresh horses there, and make a start at once."

"Nay, my lady, they have no horses at the Moorhen fit for your ladyship to drive. 'Tis only a country inn. But they'd give your horses and men a feed and rest, and if your ladyship'll pardon the liberty, you'll need both yourself."

"Yes, yes," said Philip, anxiously regarding the beautiful face which looked so pale and weary. "You must rest, dear. The journey to London will be long and tedious ..."

"But Aldwark is not on my way," she said with a slight frown of impatience.

"The inn is but a mile from here, your ladyship," rejoined Stich, "and your horses could never reach Wirksworth without a long rest. 'Tis the best plan, an your ladyship would trust me!"

"Trust you, John!" she said with a sweet smile, as she extended one tiny hand to the faithful smith. "I trust you implicitly, and you shall give me your advice. What is it?"

"To put up at the Moorhen for the night, your ladyship," explained John, whose kindly eyes had dropped a tear over the gracious hand held out to him, "then to start for London to-morrow morning."

"No, no! I must start to-night. I could not bear to wait even until dawn."

"But the footpads on the Heath, your ladyship..." hazarded John.

"Nay, I fear no footpads. They're welcome to what money I have, and they'd not care to rob me of my letters," she said eagerly. "But I'll put up at the Moorhen, John. We all need a rest. I suppose there's no way across the Heath from thence to Wirksworth."

"None, your ladyship. This is the only possible way. Back here to the cross-roads and on to Wirksworth from here."

"Then I'll see you again, dear," she said tenderly, clinging to Stretton, "at sunset mayhap. I'll start as soon as I can. You may be sure of that."

"And guard the letters, little sister," he said as he held her closely, closely to his heart. "Guard them jealously, they are my only hope."

"You'll write the letter to Lady Edbrooke," she added. "Have it ready when I return, and perhaps write out your own petition to the King – I'll use that or not as Lord Edbrooke advises."

Then once more, womanlike, she clung to him, hating to part from him even for a few hours.

"In the meanwhile you will be prudent, Philip," she pleaded tenderly. "Trust *nobody* but John Stich. *Any* man may prove an enemy," she added with earnest emphasis, "and if you were found before I could reach the King..."

She tore herself away from him. Her eyes now were swimming in tears, and she meant to seem brave to the end. Stich was urging her to hurry. After all she would see Philip again before sunset, before she started on the long journey which would mean life and safety to him.

Two minutes later, having parted from her brother, Lady Patience Gascoyne entered her coach at the cross-roads, where Mistress Betty had been waiting for her ladyship with as much patience as she could muster.

By the time Sir Humphrey Challoner's coach had reached the bottom of the decline on the Hartington Road, and begun the weary ascent up to the blacksmith's forge, Lady Patience's carriage was well out of sight beyond the bend that led eastward to Aldwark village.

CHAPTER VI

A SQUIRE OF HIGH DEGREE

The Challoners claimed direct descent from that *Sieur de Challonier* who escorted *Coeur de Lion* to the crusade against *Saladin*.

Be that as it may, there is no doubt that a *De Challonier* figures in the *Domesday Book*, as owning considerable property in the neighbourhood of the *Peak*.

That they had been very influential and wealthy people at one time, there could be no doubt. There was a room at *Old Hartington Manor* where *James I.* had slept for seven nights, a gracious guest of *Mr Ilbert Challoner*, in the year 1612. The baronetcy then conferred upon the family dates from that same year, probably as an act of recognition to his host on the part of the royal guest.

Since that memorable time, however, the *Challoners* have not made history. They took no part whatever in the great turmoil which, in the middle of the seventeenth century, shook the country to its very foundations, lighting the lurid torch of civil war, setting brother against brother, friend against friend, threatening a constitution and murdering a king.

The *Challoners* had held aloof throughout all that time, intent on preserving their property and in amassing wealth. The later conflict between a Catholic King and his Protestant people touched them even less. Neither Pretender could boast of a *Challoner* for an adherent. They remained people of substance, even of importance, in their own county, but nothing more.

Sir Humphrey Challoner was about this time not more than thirty-five years of age. *Hale*, hearty, boisterous, he might have been described as a typical example of an English squire of those days, but for a certain taint of parsimoniousness, of greed and love of money in his constitution, which had gained for him a not too enviable reputation in the *Midlands*.

He was thought to be wealthy. No doubt he was, but at the cost of a good deal of harshness towards the tenants on his estates, and he was famed throughout *Staffordshire* for driving a harder bargain than anyone else this country side.

Any traveller – let alone one of such consequence as the *Squire of Hartington* – was indeed rare in these out-of-the-way parts, that were on the way to nowhere. *Sir Humphrey* himself was but little known in the neighbourhood of *Aldwark* and *Wirksworth*, and only from time to time passed through the latter village on his way to *Derby*.

John Stich, the blacksmith, however, knew every one of consequence for a great many miles around, and undoubtedly next to the *Earls of Stretton* the *Challoners* were the most important family in the sister counties. Therefore when *Sir Humphrey's* coach stopped at the cross-roads, and the *Squire* himself alighted therefrom and walked towards the smith's cottage, the latter came forward with all the deference due to a personage of such consequence, and asked respectfully what he might do for his Honour.

"Only repair this pistol for me, master smith," said *Sir Humphrey*; "you might also examine the lock of its fellow. One needs them in these parts."

He laughed a not unpleasant boisterous laugh as he handed a pair of silver-mounted pistols to *John Stich*.

"Will your Honour wait while I get them done?" asked *John*, with some hesitation. "They won't take long."

"Nay! I'll be down this way again to-morrow," replied his Honour. "I am putting up at *Aldwark* for the night."

John said nothing. Probably he mistrusted the language which rose to his lips at this announcement of *Sir Humphrey's* plans. In a moment he remembered *Lady Patience's* look of terror when the squire's coach first came into view on the crest of the distant hill, and his faithful, honest

heart quivered with apprehension at the thought that a man whom she so obviously mistrusted was so close upon her track.

"I suppose there is a decent inn in that God-forsaken hole, eh?" asked the Squire, jovially. "I've arranged to meet my man of business there, that old scarecrow, Mittachip, but I'd wish to spend the night."

"There's only a small wayside inn, your Honour..." murmured John.

"Better than this abode of cut-throats, this Brassing Moor, anyway," laughed his Honour. "Begad! night overtook me some ten miles from Hartington, and I was attacked by a damned rascal who robbed me of fifty guineas. My men were a pair of cowards, and I was helpless inside my coach."

John tried to repress a smile. The story of Sir Humphrey Challoner's midnight adventure had culminated in fifty guineas being found in the poor box at Brassington court-house, and Mr Inch, the beadle, had brought the news of it even as far as the cross-roads.

"I must see Squire West about this business," muttered Sir Humphrey, whilst John stood silent, apparently intent on examining the pistols. "'Tis a scandal to the whole country, this constant highway robbery on Brassing Moor. The impudent rascal who attacked me was dressed like a prince, and rode a horse worth eighty guineas at the least. I suspect him to be the man they call Beau Brocade."

"Did your Honour see him plainly?" asked John, somewhat anxiously.

"See him?" laughed Sir Humphrey. "Does one ever see these rascals? Begad! he had stopped my coach, plundered me and had galloped off ere I could shout 'Damn you' thrice. Just for one moment, though, one of my lanterns flashed upon the impudent thief. He was masked, of course, but I tell thee, honest friend, he had on a coat the Prince of Wales might envy; as for his horse, 'twas a thorough-bred I'd have given eighty guineas to possess."

"And everyone knows your Honour is clever at a bargain," said John, with a suspicion of malice.

"Humph!" grunted the Squire. "By Gad!" he added, with his usual jovial laugh, "the rogue does not belie his name – 'Beau Brocade' forsooth! Faith! he dresses like a lord, and cuts your purse with an air of gallantry, an he were doing you a favour."

It was difficult to tell what went on in Sir Humphrey Challoner's mind behind that handsome, somewhat florid face of his. The task was in any case quite beyond the powers of honest John Stich, though he would have given quite a good deal of his worldly wealth to know for certain whether his Honour's journey across Brassing Moor and on to Aldwark had anything to do with that of Lady Patience along the same road.

Nothing the Squire said, however, helped John towards making a guess in that direction. Just as Sir Humphrey, having left the pistols in the smith's hands, turned to go back to his coach, he said quite casually, —

"Whose was the coach that passed here about half an hour before mine?"

"The coach, your Honour?"

"Aye! when we reached the crest of the hill my man told me he could see a coach standing at the cross-roads, whose was it?"

For one moment John hesitated. The situation was just a little too delicate for the worthy smith to handle. But he felt, as Sir Humphrey was going to Aldwark and therefore would surely meet Lady Patience, that lying would be worse than useless, and might even arouse unpleasant suspicions.

"'Twas Lady Patience Gascoyne's coach," he said at last.

"Ah!" said the Squire, with the same obvious indifference. "Whither did she go?"

"I was at work in my forge, your Honour, and her ladyship did not stop. I fancy she drove down Wirksworth way, but I did not see or hear for I was very busy."

"Hm!" commented his Honour, whilst a shrewd and somewhat sarcastic smile played round the corners of his full lips.

"I'll stay the night at Aldwark," he said, nodding to the smith. "Faith! no more travelling after dark for me on this unhallowed Moor; and for sure my horses could not reach Wirksworth now before

nightfall. So have the pistols ready for me by seven o'clock to-morrow morning, eh, mine honest friend?"

Then he entered his carriage, and slowly, with many a creak and a groan, the cumbersome vehicle turned down the road to Aldwark, whilst John Stich, with a dubious, anxious sigh, went back into his forge.

CHAPTER VII

THE HALT AT THE MOORHEN

Patience herself would have been quite unable to explain why she mistrusted, almost feared, Sir Humphrey Challoner.

The fact that the Squire of Hartington had openly declared his admiration for her, surely gave her no cause for suspecting him of enmity towards her brother. She knew that Sir Humphrey hoped to win her hand in marriage – this he had intimated to her on more than one occasion, and had spoken of his love for her in no measured terms.

Lady Patience Gascoyne was one of the richest gentlewomen in the Midlands, having inherited vast wealth from her mother, who was sister and co-heiress of the rich Grantham of Grantham Priory. No doubt her rent-roll added considerably to her attractions in the eyes of Sir Humphrey; that she was more than beautiful only helped to enhance the ardour of his suit.

Women as a rule – women of all times and of every nation – keep a kindly feeling in their heart for the suitor whom they reject. A certain regard for his sense of discrimination, an admiration for his constancy – if he be constant – make up a sum of friendship for him tempered with a gentle pity.

But in most women too there is a subtle sense which for want of a more scientific term has been called an instinct: the sense of protection over those whom they love.

In Patience Gascoyne that sense was abnormally developed: Philip was so boyish, so young, she so much older in wisdom and prudence. It made her fear Sir Humphrey, not for herself but for her brother: her baby, as in her tender motherly heart she loved to call him.

She feared and suspected him, she scarce could tell of what. Not open enmity towards Philip, since her reason told her that the Squire of Hartington had nothing to gain by actively endangering her brother's life, let alone by doing him a grievous wrong.

Yet she could not understand Sir Humphrey Challoner's motive in counselling Philip to play so cowardly and foolish a part, as the boy had done in the late rebellion. Vaguely she trembled at the idea that he should know of her journey to London, or worse still, guess its purpose. Philip, she feared, might have confided in him unbeknown to her: Sir Humphrey, for aught she knew, might know of the existence of the letters which would go to prove the boy's innocence.

Well! and what then? Surely the Squire could have no object in wishing those letters to be suppressed: he could but desire that Philip's innocence *should* be proved.

Thus reason and instinct fought their battle in her brain as the heavy coach went lumbering along the muddy road to the little wayside inn, which stood midway between the cross-roads and the village of Aldwark.

Here her man Timothy made arrangements for the resting and feeding of himself, the horses and Thomas, the driver, whilst Lady Patience asked for a private room wherein she and her maid, Betty, could get something to eat and perhaps an hour's sleep before re-starting on their way.

The small bar-parlour at the Moorhen was full to overflowing when her ladyship's coach drove up. Already there had been a general air of excitement there throughout the day, for the Corporal in his red coat, followed by his little squad, had halted at the inn, and there once more read aloud the Proclamation of His Majesty's Parliament.

The soldiers had stayed half an hour or so, consuming large quantities of ale the while, then they had marched up to the village, read the Proclamation out on the green, and finally tramped along the bridle-path back to Brassington.

And now here was the quality putting up at the Moorhen. A most unheard-of, unexpected event. Mistress Pottage, the sad-faced, weary-eyed landlady, had never known such a thing to happen before, although she had been mistress of the Moorhen for nigh on twenty years. Usually the quality from Stretton Hall or from Hartington, or even Lady Rounce from the Pike, preferred to drive a long

way round to get to Derby, sooner than trust to the lonely Heath, with its roads almost impassable four days out of five.

Master Mittachip, attorney-at-law, who had ridden over from Wirksworth with his clerk, Master Duffy, recognised her ladyship as she stepped out of her coach.

"Sir Humphrey will be astonished," he whispered to Master Duffy, as he rubbed his ill-shaven chin with his long bony fingers.

"He! he! he!" echoed the clerk, submissively.

Master Mittachip, who transacted business for the Squire of Hartington, and also for old Lady Rounce and Squire West, knew the exact shade of deference due to so great a lady as Lady Patience Gascoyne. He stood at the door of the parlour and had the honour of bowing to her as she followed Mistress Pottage quickly along the passage to the inner room Beyond, her long cloak flying out behind her, owing to the draught caused by the open doors.

Alone in the small, dingy room, Patience almost fell upon the sofa in a stupor of intense fatigue. When Mistress Pottage brought the meagre, ill-cooked food, she felt at first quite unable to eat. She lay back against the hard pillows with eyes closed, and hands tightly clutching that bundle of precious letters.

Betty tried to make her comfortable. She took off her mistress's shoes and stockings and began rubbing the cold, numb feet between her warm hands.

But by-and-by youth and health reasserted themselves. Patience, realising all the time how much depended upon her own strength and energy, roused herself with an effort of will. She tried to eat some of the food, "the mess of pottage" as she smilingly termed it, but her eyes were for ever wandering to the clock which ticked the hours – oh! so slowly! – that separated her from her journey.

As for buxom little Betty, she had fallen to with the vigorous appetite of youth and a happy heart, and presently, like a tired child, she curled herself up at the foot of the couch and soon dropped peacefully to sleep.

After awhile, Patience too, feeling numb and drowsy with the weariness of this long afternoon, closed her eyes and fell into a kind of stupor. She lay on the sofa like a log, tired out, dreamless, her senses numbed, in a kind of wakeful sleep.

How long she lay there she could not have told, but all of a sudden she sat up, her eyes dilated, her heart beating fast; she was fully awake now.

Something had suddenly roused her. What was it? She glanced at the clock; it was just half-past three. She must have slept nearly half an hour. Betty, on the floor beside her, still slumbered peacefully.

Then all her senses woke. She knew what had aroused her: the rumbling of wheels, a coach pulling up, the shouts of the driver. And now she could hear men running, more shouting, the jingle of harness and horses being led round the house to the shed beyond.

The small lattice window gave upon the side of the house, she could not see the coach or who this latest arrival at the Moorhen was; but what mattered that? she knew well enough.

For a moment she stopped to think; forcibly conquering excitement and alarm, she called to her reason to tell her what to do.

Sir Humphrey Challoner's presence here might be a coincidence, she had no cause to suspect that he was purposely following her. But in any case she wished to avoid him. How could that best be done?

Mittachip, the lawyer, had seen and recognised her. Within the next few moments the Squire would hear of her presence at the inn. He too, obviously, had come to rest his horses here. How long would he stay?

She roused Betty.

"Betty! child!" she whispered. "Wake up! We must leave this place at once."

Betty opened her eyes: she saw her mistress's pale, excited face bending over her, and she jumped to her feet.

"Listen, Betty," continued Patience. "Sir Humphrey Challoner has just come by coach. I want to leave this place before he knows that I am here."

"But the horses are not put to, my lady."

"Sh! don't talk so loud, child. I am going to slip out along the passage, there is a door at the end of it which must give upon the back of the house. As soon as I am gone, do you go to the parlour and tell Thomas to have the horses put to directly they have had sufficient rest, and to let the coach be at the cross-roads as soon as may be after that."

"Yes, my lady."

"Then as quickly as you can, slip out of the house and follow the road that leads to the forge. I'll be on the lookout for you. I'll not have gone far. You quite understand?"

"Oh, yes! my lady!"

"You are not afraid?"

Mistress Betty shrugged her plump shoulders.

"In broad daylight? Oh, no, my lady! and the forge is but a mile."

Even as she spoke Patience had wrapped her dark cloak and hood round her. She listened intently for a few seconds. The sound of voices seemed to come from the more remote bar-parlour: moreover, the narrow passage at this end was quite dark: she had every chance of slipping out unperceived.

"Sh! sh!" she whispered to Betty as she opened the door.

The passage was deserted: almost holding her breath, lest it should betray her, Patience reached the door at the further end of it, Betty anxiously watching her from the inner room. Quickly she slipped the bolt, and the next instant she found herself looking out upon a dingy unfenced yard, which for the moment was hopelessly encumbered with the two huge travelling coaches: beyond these was a long wooden shed whence proceeded the noise of voices and laughter, and the stamping and snorting of horses: and far away the Moor to the right and left of her stretched out in all the majesty of its awesome loneliness.

The wind caught her cloak as she stepped out into the yard: she clutched it tightly and held it close to her. She hoped the two coaches, which stood between her and the shed, would effectively hide her from view until she was past the house. The next moment, however, she heard an exclamation behind her, then the sound of firm steps upon the flagstones, and a second or two later she stood face to face with Sir Humphrey Challoner.

CHAPTER VIII

THE REJECTED SUITOR

Whether he was surprised or not at finding her there, she could not say: she was trying with all her might to appear astonished and unconcerned.

He made her a low and elaborate bow, and she responded with the deep curtsy the fashion of the time demanded.

"Begad! the gods do indeed favour me!" he said, his good-looking, jovial face expressing unalloyed delight. "I come to this forsaken spot on God's earth, and find the fairest in all England treading its unworthy soil."

"I wish you well, Sir Humphrey," she said gently, but coldly. "I had no thought of seeing you here."

"Faith!" he laughed with some bitterness, "I had no hope that the thought of seeing me had troubled your ladyship much. I am on my way to Derby and foolishly thought to take this shorter way across the Moor. Odd's life! I was well-nigh regretting it. I was attacked and robbed last evening, and the heavy roads force me to spend the night in this unhallowed tavern. But I little guessed what compensation the Fates had in store for me."

"I was in a like plight, Sir Humphrey," she said, trying to speak with perfect indifference.

"You were not robbed, surely?"

"Nay, not that, but I hoped to reach Derby sooner by taking the short cut across the Heath, and the state of the roads has so tired the horses, I was forced to turn off at the cross-roads and to put up at this inn."

"Your ladyship is on your way to London?"

"On a visit to my aunt, Lady Edbrooke."

"Will you honour me by accepting my protection? 'Tis scarce fit for your ladyship to be travelling all that way alone."

"I thank you, Sir Humphrey," she rejoined coldly. "My man, Timothy, is with me, besides the driver. Both are old and trusted servants. I meet some friends at Wirksworth. I shall not be alone."

"But..."

"I pray you, sir, my time is somewhat short. I had started out for a little fresh air and exercise before re-entering my coach. The inn was so stifling and..."

"Surely your ladyship will spend the night here. You cannot reach Wirksworth before nightfall now. I am told the road is well-nigh impassable."

"Nay! 'tis two hours before sunset now, and three before dark. I hope to reach Wirksworth by nine o'clock to-night. My horses have had a good rest."

"Surely you will allow me to escort you thus far, at least?"

"Your horses need a rest, Sir Humphrey," she said impatiently, "and I beg you to believe that I have sufficient escort."

With a slight inclination of the head she now turned to go. From where she stood she could just see the road winding down towards Stich's forge, and she had caught sight of Betty's trim little figure stepping briskly along.

Sir Humphrey, thus obviously dismissed, could say no more for the present. To force his escort upon her openly was unfitting the manners of a gentleman. He bit his lip and tried to look gallantly disappointed. His keen dark eyes had already perceived that in spite of her self-control she was labouring under strong excitement. He forced his harsh voice to gentleness, even to tenderness, as he said, —

"I have not dared to speak to your ladyship on the subject that lay nearest my heart."

"Sir Humphrey..."

"Nay! I pray you do not misunderstand me. I was thinking of Philip, and hoped you were not too unhappy about him."

"There is no cause for unhappiness just yet," she said guardedly, "and every cause for hope."

"Ah! that's well!" he said cheerfully. "I entreat you not to give up hope, and to keep some faith and trust in your humble servant, who would give his life for you and yours."

"My faith and trust are in God, Sir Humphrey, and in my brother's innocence," she replied quietly.

Then she turned and left him standing there, with a frown upon his good-looking face, and a muttered curse upon his lips. He watched her as she went down the road, until a sharp declivity hid her from his view.

CHAPTER IX

SIR HUMPHREY'S FAMILIAR

Mistress Pottage, sad-eyed, melancholy, and for ever sighing, had been patiently waiting to receive Sir Humphrey Challoner's orders. She had understood from his man that his Honour meant to spend the night, and she stood anxiously in the passage, wondering if he would consider her best bedroom good enough, or condescend to eat the meals she would have to cook for him.

It was really quite fortunate that Lady Patience had gone, leaving the smaller parlour, which was Mistress Pottage's own private sanctum, ready for the use of his Honour.

Sir Humphrey's mind, however, was far too busy with thoughts and plans to dwell on the melancholy landlady and her meagre fare, but he was glad of the private room, and was gracious enough to express himself quite satisfied with the prospect of the best bedroom.

Some ten minutes after his brief interview with Lady Patience he was closeted in the same little dingy room where she had been spending such weary hours. With the healthy appetite of a burly English squire, he was consuming large slabs of meat and innumerable tankards of small ale, whilst opposite to him, poised on the extreme edge of a very hard oak chair, his watery, colourless eyes fixed upon his employer, sat Master Mittachip, attorney-at-law and man of business to sundry of the quality who owned property on or about the Moor.

Master Mittachip's voice was thin, he was thin, his coat looked thin: there was in fact a general air of attenuation about the man's whole personality.

Just now he was fixing a pair of very pale, but very shrewd eyes upon the heavy, somewhat coarse person of his distinguished patron.

"Her ladyship passed me quite close," he explained, speaking in a low, somewhat apologetic voice. "I was standing in the door of – er – the parlour, and she graciously nodded to me as she passed."

"Yes! yes! get on, man," quoth Sir Humphrey, impatiently.

"The door was open, your Honour," continued Master Mittachip in a weak voice, "there was a draught; her ladyship's cloak flew open."

He paused a moment, noting with evident satisfaction the increasing interest in Sir Humphrey's face.

"Beneath her cloak," he continued, speaking very slowly, like an actor measuring his effects, "beneath her cloak her ladyship was holding a bundle of letters, tightly clutched in her hand."

"Letters, eh?" commented Sir Humphrey, eagerly.

"A bundle of them, your Honour. One of them had a large seal attached to it. I might almost have seen the device: it was that of..."

"Charles Edward Stuart, the Pretender?"

"Well! I could not say for certain, your Honour," murmured Master Mittachip, humbly.

There was silence for a few moments. Sir Humphrey Challoner had produced a silver tooth-pick, and was using it as an adjunct to deep meditation. Master Mittachip was contemplating the floor with rapt attention.

"Harkee, Master Mittachip," said Sir Humphrey at last. "Lady Patience is taking those letters to London."

"That was the impression created in my mind, your Honour."

"And why does she take those letters to London?" said Sir Humphrey, bringing his heavy fist crashing down upon the table, and causing glasses and dishes to rattle, whilst Master Mittachip almost lost his balance. "Why does she take them to London, I say? Because they are the proofs of her brother's innocence. It is easy to guess their contents. Requests, admonitions, upbraidings on the part of the disappointed rebels, obvious proofs that Philip had held aloof."

He pushed his chair noisily away from the table, and began pacing the narrow room with great, impatient strides.

But while he spoke Master Mittachip began to lose his placid air of apologetic deference, and a look of alarm suddenly lighted his meek, colourless eyes.

"Good lack," he murmured, "then my Lord Stretton is no rebel?"

"Rebel? – not he!" asserted Sir Humphrey. "His sympathies were thought to be with the Stuarts, but he went south during the rebellion – 'twas I who advised him – that he might avoid being drawn within its net."

But at this Master Mittachip's terror became more tangible.

"But your Honour," he stammered, whilst his thin cheeks assumed a leaden hue, and his eyes sought appealingly those of his employer, "your Honour laid sworn information against Lord Stretton ... and ... and ... I drew up the papers ... and signed them with my name as your Honour commanded..."

"Well! I paid you well for it, didn't I?" said Sir Humphrey, roughly.

"But if the accusation was false, Sir Humphrey ... I shall be disgraced ... struck off the rolls ... perhaps hanged..."

Sir Humphrey laughed; one of those loud, jovial, laughs which those in his employ soon learnt to dread.

"Adsbud!" he said, "an one of us is to hang, old scarecrow, I prefer it shall be you."

And he gave Master Mittachip a vigorous slap on the shoulder, which nearly precipitated the lean-shanked attorney on the floor.

"Good Sir Humphrey..." he murmured piteously, "b ... b ... b ... but what was the reason of the information against Lord Stretton, since the letters can so easily prove it to be false?"

"Silence, you fool!" said his Honour, impatiently, "I did not know of the letters then. I wished to place Lord Stretton in a perilous position, then hoped to succeed in establishing his innocence in certain ways I had in my mind. I wished to be the one to save him," he added, muttering a curse of angry disappointment, "and gain *her* gratitude thereby. I was journeying to London for the purpose, and now..."

His language became such that it wholly disconcerted Master Mittachip, accustomed though he was to the somewhat uncertain tempers of the great folk he had to deal with. Moreover, the worthy attorney was fully conscious of his own precarious position in this matter.

"And now you've gained nothing," he moaned; "whilst I ... oh! oh! I..."

His condition was pitiable. His Honour viewed him with no small measure of contempt. Then suddenly Sir Humphrey's face lighted up with animation. The scowl disappeared, and a shrewd, almost triumphant smile parted the jovial, somewhat sensuous lips.

"Easy! easy! you old coward," he said pleasantly, "things are not so bad as that... Adsbud! you're not hanged yet, are you? and," he added significantly, "Lord Stretton is still attainted and in peril of his life."

"B ... b ... b ... but..."

"Can't you see, you fool," said Sir Humphrey with sudden earnestness, drawing a chair opposite the attorney, and sitting astride upon it, he viewed the meagre little creature before him steadfastly and seriously; "can't you see that if I can only get hold of those letters now, I could *force* Lady Patience into accepting my suit?"

"Eh?"

"With them in my possession I can go to her and say, 'An you marry me, those proofs of your brother's innocence shall be laid before the King: an you refuse they shall be destroyed.'"

"Oh!" was Master Mittachip's involuntary comment: a mere gasp of amazement, of terror at the enormity of the proposal.

He ventured to raise his timid eyes to the strong florid face before him, and in it saw such a firm will, such unbendable determination, that he thought it prudent for the moment to refrain from adverse comment.

"Truly," he murmured vaguely, as his Honour seemed to be waiting for him to speak, "truly those letters mean the lady's fortune to your Honour."

"And on the day of my marriage with her, two hundred guineas for you, Master Mittachip," said Challoner, very slowly and significantly, looking his man of business squarely in the face.

Master Mittachip literally lost his head. Two hundred guineas! 'twas more than he earned in four years, and that at the cost of hard work, many kicks and constant abuse. A receiver of rents has from time immemorial never been a popular figure. Master Mittachip found life hard, and in those days two hundred guineas was quite a comfortable little fortune. The attorney passed his moist tongue over his thin, parched lips.

The visions which these imaginary two hundred guineas had conjured up in his mind almost made his attenuated senses reel. There was that bit of freehold property at Wirksworth which he had long coveted, aye, or perhaps that partnership with Master Lutworth at Derby, or...

"'Twere worth your while, Master Mittachip, to get those letters for me, eh?"

His Honour's pleasant words brought the poor man back from the land of dreams.

"I? I, Sir Humphrey?" he murmured dejectedly, "how can I, a poor attorney-at-law...?"

"Zounds! but that's your affair," said his Honour with a careless shrug of his broad shoulders, "Methought you'd gladly earn two hundred guineas, and I offer you a way to do it."

"But how, Sir Humphrey, how?"

"That's for you to think on, my man. Two hundred guineas is a tidy sum. What? I have it," he said, slapping his own broad thigh and laughing heartily. "You shall play the daring highwayman! put on a mask and stop her ladyship's coach, shout lustily: 'Stand and deliver!' take the letters from her and 'tis done in a trice!"

The idea of that meagre little creature playing the highwayman greatly tickled Sir Humphrey's fancy, for the moment he even forgot the grave issues he himself had at stake, and his boisterous laugh went echoing through the old silent building.

But as his Honour spoke this pleasant conceit, Master Mittachip's thin, bloodless face assumed an air of deep thought, immediately followed by one of eager excitement.

"The idea of the highwayman is not a bad one, Sir Humphrey," he said with a quiet chuckle, as soon as his patron's hilarity had somewhat subsided, "but I am not happy astride a horse, and I know nought of pistols, but there's no reason why we should not get a footpad to steal those letters for you. 'Tis their trade after all."

"What do you mean? I was but jesting."

"But I was not, Sir Humphrey. I was thinking of Beau Brocade."

"The highwayman?"

"Why not? He lives by robbery and hates all the quality, whom he plunders whene'er he has a chance. Your Honour has had experience, only last night ... eh?"

"Well? What of it? Curse you, man, for a dotard! Why don't you explain?"

"'Tis simple enough, your Honour. You give him the news that her ladyship's coach will cross the Heath to-night, tell him of her money and her jewels, offer him a hundred guineas more for the packet of letters... He! he! he! He'll do the rest, never fear!"

Master Mittachip rubbed his bony hands together, his colourless eyes were twinkling, his thin lips quivering with excitement, dreams of that freehold bit of property became tangible once more.

Sir Humphrey looked at him quietly for a moment or two: the little man's excitement was contagious and his Honour had a great deal at stake: a beautiful woman whom he loved and her large fortune to boot. But reason and common-sense – not chivalry – were still fighting their battle against his daring spirit of adventure.

"Tush, man!" he said after awhile, with the calmness of intense excitement, "you talk arrant nonsense when you say I'm to give a highwayman news of her ladyship's coach and offer him money for the letters. Where am I to find him? How speak with him?"

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