

EVERETT-GREEN EVELYN

FALLEN FORTUNES

Evelyn Everett-Green

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CHAPTER I.

ON THE FIELD OF RAMILLIES

"By the beard of the Prophet, we are in luck's way at last, Dicon; for if that be not the armies of the French and the Allies drawn up in battle array, my name is not Grey Dumaresq!"

The speaker had just pushed his horse over the brow of a slope which he and his servant had for some time been mounting, through the steamy warmth of a foggy May morning. The thick haze which lay heavy in this region of marshy ground had hidden the surrounding country from them hitherto; but as they reached the summit of the gradual rise they had been ascending, the cloud wreaths suddenly drifted away, and the sun began to shine out upon the undulating plain stretched before their eyes; and lo, the plain was alive with squadrons of soldiers – infantry, cavalry, artillery – drawn up in battle array; and the note of the bugle rang through the air, whilst away in the distance, on the opposite side of the plain, there was a movement which told that already the battle had begun. A sullen roar from the guns boomed forth, and the whole plain shook with the reverberation. Great masses of smoke rolled along and slowly dispersed after each salvo; but it was upon the evolutions of the bodies of horsemen and footmen that the keen eyes of the youthful traveller were intently fixed.

"Dicon," he cried, "this is in all sooth a battle; and where the battle rages, there will the great victor of Blenheim be. We have not chanced upon this route in vain. Men warned us of the perils of seeking passage through a country which has become the theatre of war; but fortune's star has befriended us thus far, and now, if I mistake me not, we stand within sight of the greatest warrior of the age. For greatly shall I be astonished if the Duke of Marlborough himself be not conducting the evolutions of yonder squadrons."

The brilliant dark eyes of the young man lighted with a great glow of excitement and admiration. He shaded them with his hand, and intently followed the evolutions of the moving masses in the plain stretched before his eyes. He was looking upon the village of Tavières and the mound of Ottomond, and the waters of the Mehaign rolled below at his feet. The right wing of the French army rested here, as he quickly saw; but for the moment the main activity lay over in the distance beyond Ramillies and Offuz, in the direction of Anderkirk. Yet as the traveller stood intently gazing, he saw a movement in the line of the allied army on this nearer side, and he exclaimed aloud in his excitement, —

"See, Dicon, see! That attack yonder is but a feint. The key of the position lies here beneath us at Tavières, with its Tomb of Ottomond. See yonder those regiments of marching soldiers creeping round beneath the shelter of that rising ground! They will fling themselves upon the enemy's right, whilst the French general is diverting his available forces to protect his left. Villeroi, my friend, you did not well to dispose your forces in concave lines. You lose time in passing from place to place; and with such a general as our English Duke pitted against you, you cannot afford to lose any point in the game. Ha! See that? The Dutch and English soldiers are charging down upon Tavières! Watch how they come on – a great resistless tide of well-drilled veterans. See how they sweep all before them! See how the French fly forth! Ha, Villeroi, what think you now? Yes, you see your error; fain would you hurry back your reserves from left to right. But the time has gone by. They are miles away, and here are the Allies carrying all before them! Hurrah for old England! hurrah for the great Duke! Dicon, have you stomach for the fight? Do you remember Barcelona and Mountjuich? If we were men enough to help there, why not here too?"

The fellow thus addressed grinned from ear to ear, and looked to the pistols in his holsters and the sabre slung at his side. It would not have been easy to define by a glance the nationality of this pair, who evidently stood to each other in the relation of master and man. Their faces were tanned by sun and wind, their dress, which was somewhat travel-stained and worse for wear, had plainly been purchased as need suggested – a piece here, and a piece there, and not all in the same land.

The speaker wore upon his fair curling hair – which was his own, and not one of the immense periwigs then in vogue at home and abroad – a Spanish sombrero of picturesque shape. His faded doublet, with its gold lacings, might have been English made, and was well cut, showing off the graceful lines of the slender, well-proportioned figure; but he wore buskins of soft Spanish leather with gold eyelets, and the short cloak slung across the saddle-bow had been purchased in Italy. He rode a strong, mettlesome barb, whose glossy bay coat shone like satin in the sunlight. The horse of the servant looked somewhat jaded, but that of the master might have just been taken from the stable. He was one of those splendid chargers, half Irish, half Spanish by blood, whose sureness of foot, untiring energy, and unquenchable spirit and mettle, made them at once the pride and joy of their owners. Young Dumaresq might have cut a finer figure in his own person, had he not elected to spend so large a portion of his remaining fortune upon the beast he now bestrode. But he had never for a moment regretted the purchase; and he boasted that Don Carlos had saved his life on more occasions than one.

The young man's eyes were full of fire; his hand was upon the hilt of his sword, which lay loose in its scabbard; the horse was pawing the ground and pulling on the rein, for the sound of battle was in his ears, and he was snorting with eagerness to hurl himself into the ranks of the combatants. The blare of the bugles, the roar of the guns, the shouts, screams, cheers of soldiers, the clash of sabres and the rattle of musketry, were as music to his ears. Suddenly flinging up his head, and uttering something between a snort and a neigh, the creature was off like an arrow from a bow, heading wildly, yet with a restraint and self-control which spoke worlds for his training, towards the hurly-burly raging through the battlefield below. Grey Dumaresq cast a half-laughing glance in the direction of his servant behind, who had set spurs to his steed and was following.

"Needs must, where the devil drives!" he said with a laugh. "Don Carlos will make soldiers of us, whether we will or no."

The battle of Ramillies was now raging. Marlborough's generalship had already made its mark. Tavières was in his hands; the right wing of the enemy was shaken, and the Dutch and English soldiers were preparing to charge the closely-serried lines of the French, even before the travellers had reached the scene of action. They heard whilst they were yet half a mile away the concussion of that charge, the yells of the soldiers, the cheers of the Allies as they felt the wavering of their foes. But the French, though the first line had been broken, were not vanquished yet. The second line was composed of the pick of the young nobility – men careless of personal peril, disdainful of death, desirous only of glory and of victory. Upon these picked troops the Allies flung themselves in fury; but they stood their ground and hurled back the attacking lines, as the rocks of an iron-bound coast fling back the oncoming waves of the ocean. It was now impossible for the traveller to gauge what was happening. He was too near the scene of the tumult; but he was in the very nick of time to bear a share in one of the minor incidents of the day, which might have proved one of infinite disaster to the cause of his country.

The Duke of Marlborough, who had been directing the attack upon the French right, saw that this second charge was less successful than the first, and giving orders for reinforcements to be hurried up, he himself galloped in the direction of the fight, to encourage with his own presence the wavering soldiers, and direct the next critical operations in person. He was exceedingly well mounted, and his horse, wild with excitement, and feeling all that sympathy with his master's mood which is natural to these noble creatures, carried him so swiftly forward, that after he had galloped along the lines, giving orders here, there, and everywhere as he passed, he overshot his position, and without noting it in the

confusion, was almost alone and at some small distance from his own lines. Before he could pull up his excited horse, there was a sudden rush from the French lines. Several young nobles and gentlemen had recognized the Duke, had taken in the accidental isolation of his position, and galloping forward with one consent, surrounded him before he was well aware what had happened.

It was just at this critical moment that the two travellers, half stunned by the noise of the battle, ignorant of what was happening, but eager for a share in the fray, topped a little rise in the ground which hid the plain from them, and came full upon the scene of the Duke's danger. The great General never lacked presence of mind, was never daunted by personal peril. He had realized his position, and setting his horse at a furious gallop, he had already broken through the ring of would-be captors, and was charging furiously for his own lines. At the very moment when Grey Dumaresq and his servant took in the meaning of what they saw, he had put his horse at a wide ditch which lay across his path, and the animal was rising to the leap.

"Zounds! but the beast is down! They will have him again!"

This shout rose from Dicon's throat. Grey set his teeth hard.

"It is the Duke himself; they shall never take him. Don Carlos shall save him from that!"

The Duke's horse had fallen heavily, throwing his rider over his head. Others besides his foes were heading wildly for the spot. All who saw it knew how much hung upon the turn of the next few seconds. First of all came the young stranger, who flung himself from his splendid horse, just as Marlborough rose to his feet, bruised and shaken, but with every faculty alert.

"Mount, sire, mount!" cried the traveller, holding the horse by the head to still his excited plunging. "The enemy are closing round; but only mount, and he will carry you safely. I will stake my last ducat upon it!"

The Duke had hold of the saddle by now; one of his own officers sprang forward to hold the stirrup. Next instant the General was in the saddle; but the head of the Colonel who stood at the stirrup was rolling upon the ground. A cannon ball had carried it off. How the Duke had escaped was a marvel and a mystery.

Excitement and lust of battle had fast hold of Grey Dumaresq and his horse. The gallant animal carried the Duke safely back to his own lines, amid the cheers of his soldiers. The young man swung himself upon the back of the riderless horse belonging to the killed Colonel, and followed him, scarce thinking what he was doing. None forbade him. Many had seen his prompt and timely action; many watched him as the tide of battle raged this way and that, and saw that, whether a trained soldier or not, this young stranger was no novice in the art of war. The Duke himself turned more than once to watch him, as he joined in some headlong charge, and turned and wheeled, or gave thrust or parry with the ease of practice and the skill which only comes through experience. Once in a pause he beckoned the young man to his side, and said, —

"I would speak with you, sir, when I am at leisure. Come to my quarters, wherever they may be, when the battle is over. I have somewhat to say to you."

The young man bowed low, and promised compliance with this request; but it was many long hours before he and the victorious General stood face to face. The battle itself had been won in less than four hours, but the pursuit had been long, lasting far into the night; and the dawn was well-nigh breaking in the eastern sky when Grey received a message that the Duke desired speech of him in the house at Mehlert, where he had stopped short, whilst his soldiers continued the pursuit of the flying foe almost up to the walls of Louvain.

Marlborough was sitting at a table, whereon stood the remains of a hasty meal; and from the writing materials before him, it was plain that he had been penning one of those dispatches to his wife without which he could never rest, even after the most arduous day's campaigning. He had changed some of his clothes, and though pale and somewhat jaded, preserved that air of elegance and distinction which was always one of his most marked characteristics. But even without spotless linen and fine array, there was something in the high-bred courtesy of Marlborough's manner, and

in the singular beauty of his face and person, which always won the hearts of those about him, and particularly so during those years when the magnificence of his military genius was making him the man of greatest mark in Europe.

He rose as the young stranger was ushered in, and offered his hand with a frank and gracious courtesy free from any alloy of condescension or patronage.

"I wish to thank you in person, sir, for the great service you this day rendered me with such timely promptitude. I have never bestridden a better horse, and owe you much for the loan. I would fain learn the name of the gentleman to whom I am so deeply indebted."

"My name, your Grace, is Grey Dumaresq; and that of my horse, Don Carlos. I thank you for your gracious words. We shall feel honoured for all time in that kind Fortune gave us the chance of rendering you some small aid in a moment of peril. The world would have been terribly the poorer by this day's work, had mischance touched the Duke of Marlborough!"

The General smiled, and motioned the young man to be seated. He himself took a seat opposite, and studied him with some attention.

"If you and your good horse are in any sort disposed to put your strength and skill at the service of your country, Mr. Dumaresq, I think I can promise you a position not far from my own person, which will not be without opportunities of profit, and will give scope to your prowess with sword and lance, which I have had the opportunity of observing more than once this day."

The young man's face flushed with pleasure. He looked eagerly into the face of the great man.

"Were I a free agent, your Grace, most gladly would I take advantage of your offer, asking nothing better at Fortune's hands than to serve you faithfully. But I am on my way to England to learn news of my father. For three years I have been absent from my native shores. For three years I have been a wanderer, and, I fear me, a spendthrift to boot. I have spent or squandered the fortune with which I started forth. Rumour has reached me that my father's health has given way, and that I am needed at home. I fear me I have not been a good son to him heretofore. I must therefore seek to be the solace of his declining years, if the reports I have heard concerning him be true."

Marlborough mused awhile with a slight smile upon his lips. He had a good memory for names, and had an idea that Sir Hugh Dumaresq, the probable father of the youth before him, had not been a man to inspire any very deep affection in the heart of his son. He bore the reputation of being a rake of the first order. It was said that he had broken his wife's heart, and cared nothing for the boy who would succeed him.

"That is a pious resolution on your part, my friend. I trust you may be rewarded, and I will not seek to stay you. Methinks your mother was a good and gentle woman. Her son will live to do her credit yet."

The young man's eyes lighted, and his face softened.

"My mother was an angel upon this earth. Would God I had not lost her so soon! Did you know her, my lord? She was kinswoman to the hapless Lord Grey, who took up the cause of the Duke of Monmouth twenty years since, and whom your Grace defeated and routed on the field of Sedgemoor, fatal to so many. She gave me her name, and she bequeathed to me the small fortune which passed into my keeping three years ago, when I came of age. Since then I have been a wanderer in many lands. I have seen hard blows given and taken; I have been in many perils and battles. I was with Lord Peterborough when he fell upon the fort of Mountjuich, and made himself master of Barcelona, just when all hope of taking it seemed at an end. I have fought in the ranks of the Duke of Savoy against the veterans of France. I have been a soldier of fortune for this year or more, and though often in peril and hard pressed, have never received aught but a scratch now and again. I did hope that I should not travel northwards without seeing something of the campaign under the great Duke, whose name is in all men's mouths; but I did not dare to ask or hope for the honour which has been mine to-day."

Marlborough's eyes lighted as the young man spoke, and he asked many quick and pertinent questions of the traveller anent those lands of Spain and Italy, in whose politics and disposition of

parties he was so keenly interested. He had desired above all things to prosecute this summer an Italian campaign. Difficulties with the Dutch field-deputies alone hindered the more dashing and offensive policy which he would so gladly have adopted. He listened with keen interest to Grey's account of his journey through Savoy, his interview with Victor Amadeus, and his successful feat of carrying important dispatches into Turin, though hemmed in by the French, and waiting sorrowfully for relief; and his escape thence, and journey to the camp of Prince Eugene, who was seeking to carry relief to the Duke of Savoy, and eventually to drive the French back over their own borders.

All this was intensely interesting to Marlborough, and he more than ever felt a desire to keep in his service a youth who seemed to possess so many of the qualifications which he most prized. But he was a man, too, who never undervalued the domestic side of life, or willingly interfered with the duties engendered by filial or conjugal ties. So he checked the words which had well-nigh risen once again to his lips, and only said graciously, —

"You have indeed been smiled upon by Dame Fortune, Mr. Dumaresq. Many a young blood would give half his fortune for the chances you have had. Methinks the world will hear of you yet. The brow of a poet, the thews of a warrior, a head calm and well-balanced, and a soul that shrinks not in the hour of peril — "

He paused a moment, and the young man's cheek glowed.

"Your Grace thinks too highly of my poor merits, I fear me. I trust I have not spoken as a braggart; for, in sooth, it is little I have to boast me of. A good horse beneath me, a faithful comrade by my side, a keen Toledo blade in mine hand, and all else came of itself. I have been happy in my days of peril and adventure; but now I must lay aside my weapons and my roving habits, and strive to show myself a good son, and take up my duties as my father's right hand and helper, if it be true that he is laid aside from active life, and needs me with him henceforth."

Marlborough had taken up a pen, and was writing a few lines upon a sheet of paper which lay upon the table. When he had finished, he handed it open to the young man.

"A pass for yourself and your servant, Mr. Dumaresq; you may find it useful in passing through a disturbed country. But you will be wise to avoid the French frontier, and all cities where they have garrisons, and to confine yourself to the Dutch Netherlands, to make your way to the Hague, and thence to England. With this pass in your possession, you should then have small difficulty in travelling without molestation. And let me ask you if you have funds sufficient for your needs, since it is dear work at times travelling through a country devastated by war, and I would not have my benefactor crippled for lack of a few pieces of gold."

The young man's face flushed slightly, but his eyes were frank and smiling. He laid his hand upon an inner breast pocket, and tapped it significantly.

"I thank your Grace from my heart; but, albeit I have squandered my fortune something too lavishly, I have yet enough and to spare to take me home. Were it otherwise," he added, with a very engaging look upon his handsome features, "there is nobody to whom I would be more gladly indebted than to his Grace of Marlborough."

The Duke's face was pleasant to see. He had taken a great liking for this young man. He hesitated a moment, and said, —

"You would not care to sell your horse? I would give a goodly price for such a charger."

"My lord, if I loved him less, most gladly would I beg your Grace's acceptance of him, and would rejoice that Don Carlos should be thus honoured. As it is, he is the greatest friend and best comrade I possess in the world. I trow I must needs take him home with me."

"You are right, boy, you are right. And it is better so; for he might meet a bloody end any moment in these rough campaigning days. But you must not go hence without some token of the good will and gratitude John Churchill bears you. Take this ring, and wear it for my sake. And should ever trouble, or loss, or misfortune fall upon you, and you be in need, in my absence abroad, of a friend at home, take it and show it to my wife. I shall write to her of this day's peril, and how I was saved

in the nick of time; and when she sees that ring in your hands, she will know who was her husband's deliverer, and will know, too, how to receive and reward him."

The ring held out was a large amethyst of great brilliance and beauty, with a curious oriental-looking head engraved upon it, with what might be a legend in some Eastern tongue. It was a trinket which, once seen, would not easily be forgotten, and Grey Dumaresq slipped it upon his finger with a smile of gratification. It was no small thing to feel himself thus honoured by Europe's greatest general.

He rose to his feet and bowed low; but Marlborough held out his hand and pressed his fingers warmly. "I shall not forget you, my friend. I trust that yours will be one of the faces that will greet me first, when I shall return home to England after the close of the campaign."

The young man's face lighted with pleasure at these words.

"I think your Grace may rely upon that," he said. "I thank you with all my heart for this most gracious reception."

"The thanks are mine to give – yours to receive," spoke the Duke with his winning graciousness. "Farewell, my friend. May Dame Fortune continue to smile upon your career; and may you live to be prosperous and famous, and find one to love and be loved by faithfully – for, believe me, without true conjugal love, a man's life is desolate and empty, and nothing can fill the ache of a heart that has no loving ones at home to rejoice with him in his joy and weep at his misfortunes. Ambition may go far, success may be sweet; but it is love which is the true elixir of life. A man who loves and is loved can defy misfortune, poverty, even age and sickness and death; for love alone is eternal."

He spoke like one inspired, and his whole face kindled. Grey Dumaresq never forgot the smile upon the face of the great victorious General, as he saw it in that little room at Meldert on the morrow of the victory of Ramillies.

CHAPTER II. HARTSBOURNE

The soft June dusk was falling with dewy freshness over smiling meadow and forest glade, and the long, long shadows were melting away in the dimness of a night that would never be dark, when Grey Dumaresq halted upon the brow of a little hill, and gazed before and around him with eager pleasure, not untinged with wistfulness.

Somewhere amid those swelling woodlands lying to the south-west lay his childhood's home. He had hoped to make this spot ere the sun sank; and then he knew he could have traced the gleam of the shining streamlet, slipping like a silver streak between masses of sombre green. He might even, if the leaves had not made too thick a screen, have descried the twisted chimneys and timbered gables of the old house itself. His heart beat and his throat swelled as he gazed out over the darkening prospect. How he had loved that home of his so long as it had been blessed by his mother's presence there! With what proud delight had he sometimes pictured to himself the time when it might be his own, his very own! From childhood he had been called "the little master – the little heir." If his mother had not dubbed him so, the servants had. For Sir Hugh Dumaresq, alas, had not been a man to inspire either affection or respect in the hearts of servants or of son, and the child had dreamed dreams of the golden days which he and his mother might some day enjoy, when he should be lord of all, and live to wipe away tears from her eyes, and ensure that nothing should trouble or harass her again.

That fond dream had died its own death when the mother was laid to sleep beneath the churchyard sod, and the boy, broken-hearted and indifferent to his fate, had gone forth first to school and then to college, and had known the sweet word "home" no longer.

It was years now since he had seen Hartsbourne. At first he could not bear the idea of revisiting it, to find it empty of the one loved presence which had made it what it was to him. Afterwards his father had ceased to dwell there, had lived more and more in London, had even let the old Manor, as Grey heard before he quitted England for the roving life of the past three years.

He had been somewhat hurt and angry when this was told him; for he had planned to go and bid the old place farewell, and he no longer cared to do so then. True, it was a kinsman who dwelt there now. His father had spoken of him with a cynical smile.

"He is next of kin, after you, my son; and he has a greater gift of thrift than will ever be mine or yours, I take it. If anything should befall you on these wanderings upon which your heart is set, he would be the one to come after me, and take title and estates in his own right. If he like now to pay me my price, he may share the old house with the rats and the bats, for all I care. I love not to spend good money upon leaking roofs and bowing walls. Give me the parks and the coffee-houses, the Mall and the play-house! The devil may fly away with that rotten old house, for all I care!"

This sentiment, rapped out with a good many of the fashionable oaths of the time, had been Grey's first intimation that his beloved old home was falling into decay. As a child it had seemed all the more perfect from that lack of newness or primness, the wildness of the garden, the encroachments of weed and woodland, which mark the first stages of decay. These words had opened his eyes to the fact that his father was letting the old place take care of itself, without regard to the future, and even then he had been conscious of the stirrings of a certain vague resentment. But he had been powerless to act; for although he had just received a small fortune which his mother had hoarded for him, and which had been nursed for him by a kinsman on the Grey side, he had no power to take over Hartsbourne and expend his wealth upon the old home; moreover, by that time the longing for travel and adventure was keen upon him, and he had made every arrangement for a tour of the then known world. His father rather encouraged than lamented his proposed absence; and the youth longed to be his own master, and to feel the strength of his wings.

Yet now, after three years' wandering about the world, Grey found himself gazing with a swelling heart upon the familiar outlines of the region of his childhood's home, and the voices of the past seemed calling him aloud – tender, sweet-toned voices, which had been silent for long, but which awoke now to cry aloud with strange insistence.

The solemn moon rose over the tree-tops as Grey gazed breathlessly upon the dim panorama before him, and instantly the world became flooded with a mystic radiance. A church spire stood suddenly out like a silver beacon, and Grey caught his breath as he watched; for his mother's grave lay beneath the walls of that little church, and the cross upon its apex seemed like a finger beckoning to him to come.

"Yonder is our goal, Dicon," spoke the young man, as his servant, whom he had outridden in his eager haste, spurred up the ridge to his side. "You cannot see the house in this uncertain light; but it lies in yon deep hollow, away to the right from the church. The river winds about it, guarding it from ill, as I used to think in my boyish fantasy. I have seen the harts and does come down from the forest to drink at its waters. Hartsbourne was the name they gave the house, and methinks it was well named. Ah me! – to think how many years have passed since I beheld it all! Hark! Can you not hear the old familiar voices calling the wanderer home?"

The honest servant nodded his head with a smile upon his rugged features. He loved his young master devotedly, and was not unaccustomed to share his musings, whether they were dashed with poetic melancholy or were full of reckless daring. Whatever his master's mood, honest Dick admired him with equal fervour. As their horses picked a way down the descent in the darkness, he hazarded a question.

"You think you will find your noble father there, sir?"

"Why, surely yes, Dicon. Where should a man be when failing in health and strength, if not at his own home?"

"As for that, sir, I know nothing. But you have told me how that he loved not his own house, but gave it over into the hands of his kinsman, that he might take his pleasure elsewhere."

"Very true, Dicon; but that was when he was hale and strong. When ill-health and feebleness overtook him, I doubt not that all was changed. True, I have not heard from him these many months; but that is no marvel, since I myself have been a very wandering Jew. But the gentleman who brought me news of him unawares did say that he was about to quit London, for whose giddy round he had no longer strength or inclination. I have never doubted but that Hartsbourne would be the place of his choice; and hither have I come. I might have learned news of him by going straight to London; but why turn aside from our way for that, when I feel so sure that it is here we shall find him? Doth not nature call every man home to his bed at night, and to his own home at the close of his life? My father is not old – Heaven send he may live long yet; but if disease has crippled his powers and robbed him of his zest of life, I doubt not but that it is here we shall surely find him."

Two days previously the travellers had landed safely at the port of Harwich, having had a safe and speedy crossing from the Hague. The pass given them by the Duke of Marlborough had rendered their journey from Louvain an easy one. From the seaport, Grey had taken the direct road into Hertfordshire, feeling certain that here, and not in London, would he now find his father. He had hoped to arrive ere set of sun; but a few mischances along the road, and the sultry heat of the midday hours, had delayed them. Nevertheless, being now so near, he pressed on steadily. He could not rest so near to home, save beneath the old roof-tree. As the windings of the path grew more familiar, his heart throbbed in his breast. Here they passed the boundary of his father's estate. That broken cross marked the spot. And yonder, sleeping in the moonlight, hoary and beautiful, lay the ruined fragments of what had once been an old priory. He could see that the walls had crumbled away during his years of absence; but one beautiful arch still stood as of old, the delicate tracery showing clear in the moonlight. White owls flitted from the thick wreaths of ivy, and hooted weirdly as they sailed by on noiseless wing. A wild cat leaped out with a menacing yell, and both horses snorted and

plunged at the sight and sound. Dick's hand was on his pistol stock; but seeing what it was, he uttered a half uneasy laugh.

"A bad omen, my master," he spoke, as he quieted his horse. "That wild black thing was liker some witch or devil than aught I have clapped eyes on this many a day. Saints preserve us from spell or charm!"

For Dick, albeit a good Protestant by profession, had caught some of the phrases of the people in whose lands he had dwelt, and he was by no means free from superstition, though a bold enough rogue to meet any peril that he could combat with sword or bullet.

"Tush, Dicon! Dost fear a cat, man? For my part, I love all the wild things of the woods, and would be the friend of all. See yonder! There should be a tangled path leading down through the forest glade, and across the stream by a ford to the house itself. Methinks I cannot lose the way, though the path be overgrown, and the light treacherous. – Onward, good Carlos! Fodder and rest are nigh at hand. Within the space of half an hour you and I should both be installed safely at home."

Home! The word was as music to his ears. It seemed to set itself to the beat of the horses' hoofs along the tangled path, which Grey had some trouble in finding. But once found, he was able to trace it without difficulty; and soon the soft whisper of the water fell upon his ears, and the stream lay before him shining in the moonlight.

How beautiful it was upon this still June night! The young green of the trees could not shut out the silvery beams of the moon. The forest was full of whispering voices, and every voice seemed to be welcoming back the stranger-son. The warblers amid the sedges and the fringe of alders along the course of the winding stream filled the air with soft music, not less sweet, if less powerful, than that of the nightingale pouring out his heart in song a little farther away. Sometimes a sleeping deer in some deep hollow sprang up almost from beneath their feet, and dashed, phantom-like, away into the dim aisles of the wood.

And now the wall loomed up before them which separated the house and its precincts from the wilderness of wood and water beyond. Grey well knew this mouldering wall, from which the coping had fallen in many places, and which showed more than one ill-repaired breach in the once sound masonry. The ivy had grown into a tangled mass upon it, and was helping to drag it down. Any active marauder could have scaled it easily. But Grey turned his horse, and skirted round it for some distance. For he knew that a door at the angle gave entrance into the stable-yard, and from thence to the courtyard and entrance-hall of the old house; and as it was already past midnight, he preferred to take this way rather than approach by the avenue to the front of the house.

He turned the angle of the wall, and there was the entrance he was making for. But how desolate it all looked! The double doors had rusted from off their hinges, and stood open, none seeming to care to close them at night. The courtyard was so grass-grown that the feet of the horses scarcely sounded as they entered. A range of stables stood half open, some mouldy straw rotting in the stalls, but no signs of life either in the stables below or the living-rooms above. Grey directed Dicon to the forage store, and bade him look if there were not something to be found there for the horses; and whilst the man was thus engaged, finding enough odds and ends to serve for a meal for the beasts, the master passed through an inner door into a second courtyard, and gazed upward at a range of lancet windows which, in former days, had belonged to the rooms occupied by the servants.

Not a light glimmered in any casement; not a dog barked challenge or welcome. It was not wonderful that the house should be dark and silent at such an hour; but it was more than darkness which reigned here. There was a look of utter desolation and neglect brooding over the place. Broken casements hung crazily, and swung creaking in the night air. Tiles had slipped from the roof, chimney stacks seemed tottering to their fall. True, the great nail-studded oaken door, which Grey well remembered as leading through a long arched passage past the servants' quarters and into the front entrance-hall, was closed and locked; but rust had eaten deep into all the iron work, and cobwebs hung in festoons from the eaves of the dilapidated porch.

In vain Grey beat upon the door with the pommel of his sword. Not a sound from within betokened the presence of living creature. A sudden fear shook him lest he had come too late. This idea had never troubled him before. His father was still young in years. Dissipation might have weakened him, made him an easy prey to disease; but surely, surely had aught worse than that befallen, he would have heard it – he would have been summoned back. It was not any very tender bond that had existed betwixt father and son; but after all, they had no one else. Grey felt his heart grow suddenly cold within him.

Then a new idea entered his head. He turned away from the door, and passed hastily through the courtyard into a walled enclosure beyond, which had plainly once been a fine kitchen-garden, where giant espaliers still lined the paths, and masses of apple blossom glimmered ghostly in the moonlight. Striding along one of the paths under the house wall, where shuttered windows, looking like blind eyes, gave back a stony stare, he reached at last a quaint little offshoot of the house, set in an angle where house and garden wall joined; and he uttered a short exclamation of satisfaction as he saw that here there were traces of habitation in clean, bright window panes, flowers in a strip of border beneath, and a door that looked as though it could move upon its hinges. Upon this door he thumped with hearty good will.

"Jock! Jock! Wake up, man – wake up! Don't tell me that you are a ghost too – that the old house is peopled only with ghosts of the past. – A dog's bark! Good! Where there is dog, there is man. – Wake up, Jock! Wake up and open the door. Have no fear. It is I – the young master."

"God bless my soul! Ye don't say so!" cried a cracked voice from within. – "Quiet, Ruff; be still, man! – Yes, yes, I'm comin', I'm comin'."

The sound of a bolt slipped back gave evidence of this, and next moment the door was opened from within, a shaggy head was thrust forth, and an old man, evidently just risen from his bed, gazed for a moment at the intruder, who stood plainly revealed in the moonlight and uttered a heartfelt exclamation.

"Heaven be praised! – it is Sir Grey himself!"

The young man fell back as though before a blow. "Sir Grey! What mean you by that, Jock? Sir Grey!"

"Why, master dear, you surely have heard the news! You have been Sir Grey since the week after Christmas."

"You mean – my father – nay, Jock – how can I speak the words?"

"He died two days after Christmas, Sir Grey. He had me with him to the last. He never trusted that knave of a kinsman, not he, though he had let himself get fast into his clutches. Ah, if you had but been with us then! Woe is me! for we wanted you sorely. It was hard upon All Saints' Day that the old master came back. He was sick; he had lost the use of his limbs. The leeches said they could do naught for him, but that he might live to be an old man yet. He made light of it at first. He vowed he would cheat them all. But we all saw death in his face. In two months he lay over yonder by the side of our sweet lady."

Jock, though no great speaker at ordinary times, had made, for him, a long speech, because the young master said not a word, but stood leaning against the angle of the wall as though overcome by the news he had heard.

"And why was I not sent for?" The words were a whisper.

"You were, Sir Grey, you were – leastways the master told me so. He said that Mr. Barty had written many letters, and sent them after you by trusty messengers. But Lord, if 'twere only what that rogue said, belike the trusty messenger was nothing better than the fire, into which he dropped his own letters after satisfying the master by writing them."

"What mean you, Jock?" asked Grey, with dry lips. "And who is this Mr. Barty of whom you speak?"

"Faith, none other but him as hopes one day to style himself Sir Bartholomew Dumaresq – your father's cousin, Sir Grey, and next of kin after you. 'Tis he as has got his grip so fast upon Hartsbourne that it'll be a tough bit of work to shake it off. He's got mortgages on the place, the old master told me at the last, and he's been squeezing it like a sponge these many years – cutting the timber, grinding the tenants, living like a miser in one corner of the house, letting all else go to wrack and ruin, that there may be nothing for the heir to come into. Oh, the master saw through him at the last, that he did; but 'twas too late then. Here he is, stuck fast like a leech to the old place, and sucking its life-blood dry, and protected by the law, so that even you can't touch him; the master told me that before he died. He'd got him to sign papers when he was merry with wine, and knew not nor cared what he signed. So long as Mr. Barty supplied him with money, he cared for naught else; and now he's got such a grip on house and lands that it'll be a matter of years before ever he can be got out, if ever that day come at all."

A numb feeling began to creep over Grey. He felt like one walking in a bad dream. The blow of hearing of his father's death was a heavy one. It seemed to shake the foundations of his life to their very base. And now his home was lost to him! Little as he understood the machinations of his kinsman, he grasped that he had come into nothing but a barren title and nominal possession of a ruinous and dilapidated old house, the revenues of which were in some way alienated to another. He had heard such tales before. He did not discredit old Jock's recital. It fitted in only too well with what he knew of his father's recklessness and selfish expenditure, and his kinsman's artful grasping policy. So, after all, he had come to a home that was not his; and he would have to face the world again as something very like a beggar.

Old Jock's hand upon his arm aroused him to a sense of outward things. Dicon had come up, and was listening with wide eyes and falling jaw to the recital of the same story as had been told in outline to Grey. The fuller details only made it sound more true and lifelike.

"Come in, Sir Grey, come in. There's bite and sup for you in the cupboard. The old master didn't forget me, and I can make shift to earn my bread by hook or by crook even without regular wage. Come in, come in, and I'll give ye what I've got for ye. 'Twas all the old master had left from his hoard; but he said it would give you a start in life, and that your wits must do the rest. He gave it me private like, when Mr. Barty was off the place, and I buried it beneath the hearthstone that same day. 'Tis all safe for you, Sir Grey; and you won't go penniless into the world, for all that this villain of a kinsman reigns at Hartsbourne, where you should be."

CHAPTER III. THE SCHEMING KINSMAN

They sat face to face in a room which Grey well remembered. It had been lined with folios in those days – great tomes in which he had dug with breathless delight, for the treasures of wood-cuts and the strange stories they possessed – and illuminated missals, where, amid a mass of gilding and wonderful colours, the story of saint or martyr could be traced. Other and more modern works had been also there, specimens of the art of printing as carried on through the days of the Stuarts. But where were all these tomes and scrolls and books now? Grey swept the empty shelves with quick, indignant glances. A motion of his hands seemed to ask the question his lips were too proud to speak.

A small and wizened man sat before him, his eyes furtively scanning the young man's face with an unwinking attention. He could not have been old, this parchment-faced kinsman – not more than five-and-forty at the most – and yet he wore the look of an old man, and was fond of speaking of himself as such. The unhealthy pallor of his face bespoke a life of inaction, and the lines and wrinkles on the puffy skin, and the emaciation of the frame and claw-like hands, seemed either to indicate some wasting disease, or else a miser-like habit of life which denied its owner the common necessaries of existence. Grey fancied that perhaps this latter surmise might be the right one; for he himself would have fared ill at breakfast that morning, had it not been for the fish which Dicon had caught and cooked for the pair, ere he presented himself at the meal to which his kinsman invited him on hearing of his advent to the old house. That meal had been so frugal that Grey almost disdained to partake of it. And now he and Mr. Dumaresq sat facing each other in the green light which fell through the big north window, against which the trees almost brushed, rather like combatants in a duel, each of which measures the strength and skill of the other before attempting to strike.

The wizened man made a deprecating gesture with his hand, and answered the unspoken question.

"Sold, sold – every one of them! I did my best to keep them in the family, but it was of no avail. Your father would have money – no matter at what cost. I was toiling all I knew for him, as it was. Everything that could be got out of the estate I squeezed out for him. Never man had so faithful a steward as I was to my poor cousin. But it was like pouring water through a sieve. Nay, you need not look so fiercely at me. I am not traducing the dead. Ask those with whom he consorted. Ask the boon companions he made in gay London town. Ask his very servants, an you will. You will hear the same tale from all. He spent money like water. Never did he trouble his head where it was to come from. I have papers; I can show them if you have knowledge of the law enough to understand. I advanced him sum after sum, on such poor security as this tumble-down house and impoverished estate has to offer. I beggared myself for his sake. He was the only kinsman left me. I could deny him nothing. And when my funds were gone, I must needs squeeze all that could be squeezed out of the house and land. The books went; the timber was felled; the pictures were taken away; the best of the furniture went to adorn the houses of merchants and parvenus. I argued and entreated in vain. When the wild fit was upon him, Hugh would listen to nothing. I had to content myself with serving him, by seeing that he was not cheated beyond bearing by the crew of harpies he had around him. At least I secured him equitable prices for family heirlooms; but it went to my heart to see them vanish one by one. And now, what is left save the shell of the old house, and an estate burdened and impoverished well-nigh beyond the power of redemption?"

He heaved a great sigh, looking cunningly at the young man out of the corners of his ferret-like eyes. Grey's glance was stern and direct. His words were quietly and coldly spoken.

"We will see about that. I am here to take up my burden. I will learn whether or not Hartsbourne be past redemption."

"You!" cried 'Mr. Dumaresq quickly; "and pray what can you do?"

"I can live here quietly, and see what can be done towards retrieving the past. Even if I toil with my own hands, I shall think it no shame, if it be for the home of my forefathers."

"You live here!" sneered the other, seeking to mask the sneer by a smile; "and by what right will you do that, pray?"

"I am the owner," answered Grey proudly. "I presume that I have the right to live in my own house, and to administer such revenues as may be left to the estate?"

"Oh yes, fair kinsman, so soon as the mortgages be paid. I will get them out for your high mightiness to examine. Pay them off, and house and manor are yours to do with as you will. But till that time come, I, and not you, am master here. The revenues are mine; the house I have the right to occupy, to the exclusion of any other. It is all writ fair to see – signed and sealed. Will you see the papers for yourself? They will make pleasant study for a summer morning."

"I will look at the papers anon," answered Grey quietly; "but first I would know from you what it all means. It is you, not I, to whom Hartsbourne belongs, then? You are the master, and I am the guest?"

"For the present, yes; but a welcome guest, none the less," spoke the older man with a repulsive leer. "The situation, my bold young cousin, is easily understood. Your father loved not the old family house. I did love it. Could he have sold it, it would have been mine long since; but he had not the power to alienate it from the title. But he did all else that was possible. He raised mortgage upon mortgage upon it – first on the house, then on the land. I came to live in the house, and paid him rent for it once. Then I supplied him with money and took up the mortgages. He and I had been boys together. The tie between us was strong. I verily believe he was glad to have me here, and when he was sick and smitten with mortal disease he came hither to die, and I was with him to the last. He was grateful for my devoted service. He was glad to think that I should live on here afterwards. 'It is no life for a young man,' he said almost at the last. 'Grey will carve out a career for himself. Here he could only rot and starve like a rat in a hole.' And I pointed out that you were my natural heir, and that you might not have very long to wait before coming a second time into your inheritance."

Grey sat silent and baffled. It was little he knew of the law; but he had heard before this of men who had left nothing save debts and troubles for those who came after them. Many a fair manor and estate passed into alien hands for years, or even for generations, when trouble fell upon the owners. He understood only too well how it had been here at Hartsbourne – everything squeezed out of the estate, nothing put in, till at last the house was falling into ruin, and the rights of the lord of the manor had passed away from the owner. It was no consolation to Grey that a Dumaresq had supplanted him. He was cut to the heart by the selfish extravagance of his father, and the way in which he had played into the hands of this schemer. He saw how impossible it would be to attempt to live here himself, even if he could establish a legal right to do so. He was not certain if his father could have done anything which should actually hinder him from claiming possession of the house which was his, but to find money to pay off the mortgages – he might as well have sought for money to buy the moon! And even then, how could he live in a house without money, without servants, without friends? No; he must seek to carve out a fortune for himself. His fair dream of a peaceful life in England as a country squire was shattered into a thousand pieces. Some day perhaps – some day in the dim and distant future, when fortune and fame were his – he might come back to take possession of his own. It should be his dream – the goal of his ambition – to dwell at Hartsbourne as its lord and master. But for the present he could call nothing his own save the good horse cropping the lush June grass in the paddock, and that casket so carefully hidden beneath the hearthstone of old Jock's living-room. He would look at the papers. He would make careful study of them. He would take notes as to the amount necessary to clear the estate and make him master in reality. And then he would go; he would not be beholden to this kinsman, whose shifty face he distrusted heart and soul, though his words

were smooth and fair. He would ride forth into the fair world of an English midsummer, and would see what the future held there for him.

It was not an exhilarating hour which he spent over the parchments spread out before his eyes, which were eagerly explained to him by the lynx-eyed kinsman, who seemed half afraid to trust them out of his own claw-like clutches. But Grey perused them with attention, making notes the while; and after studying these at the close, whilst the deeds were being locked away, he said, —

"Then when I return with thirty thousand pounds in my pocket, I can take over Hartsbourne, house and lands and all, and be master of my own estate in deed as well as in word?"

"And how are you to come by this thirty thousand pounds, fair coz?" asked Mr. Dumaresq, with something slightly uneasy in his shifty glance. "Right gladly would I receive mine own, and make way for a gallant gentleman like you; but where are these riches of Aladdin to come from?"

"Perchance from the same source as yours did come, sir," answered Grey, looking full at his interlocutor. "The Dumaresqs have not ranked as a wealthy family since the days of the Civil War, when they lost so much. But you seem to have found fortune's golden key; and if you, why not I?"

Did he shrink and cower under these words, or was it only Grey's fancy that he did so? The young man could not be sure, though he had his suspicions. At any rate he spoke suavely enough.

"Thrift and care, my young friend, care and thrift — these qualities are better than any golden key of hazard. My father was a careful, saving man, and at his death bequeathed me greater wealth than I dreamed he did possess. I followed in his footsteps until, for your father's sake, I elected to prop the falling fortunes of the house rather than live in selfish affluence on my own revenues. Well, I did what seemed right; and my reward shall be the hope of seeing Hartsbourne one day restored to its former glories. But for the present I must needs live like a poor man, though that is no trouble to one who has ever made thrift the law of life."

Grey went forth from the presence of his kinsman with a cloud on his brow and a fire in his heart.

"Why doth he speak of himself as poor?" he asked of himself. "He takes to himself all the revenues of the estate; and when I was a boy, I always heard that the farms were prosperous, the land fertile, the timber fine, game and deer plentiful, and the tenants able to pay their dues. If all that comes in goes into his pocket, wherefore doth he live like a miser? wherefore doth he let the house fall into decay? he ruined himself for my father's sake? Tush! A man with that face sacrifice himself for another! Nay; but he is hoarding up gold for himself, or I greatly mistake me. Truly do I believe that he is playing some deep game of his own. Well, I can but wait and see what time will bring forth. It is a shame that the old house should be left to go to ruin like this, with its revenues falling regularly into the hands of a Dumaresq! Why doth he not spend them upon the fine old structure, to make it what it was before? Why, now I see. He thinks it would stimulate me to fresh desire to make myself master. He may haply think that I care not for a habitation given up to rats and ghosts and cobwebs. He little thinks that every fallen stone seems to cry out aloud to me, and that the lower falls the old house in ruin and neglect, the more urgent is the voice with which it urges me to come and save it."

The young man was walking up and down the grass-grown avenue as he thus mused. From thence he could see in perspective the long south front, with its many mullioned windows, its beautiful oriels, and the terrace up and down which he had raced in the days of his happy childhood. Straight in front was the eastern portion of the house, with its great entrance doors, led up to by a fine double stairway, beneath which a coach could stand, and its occupants in wet weather enter by a lower door. But the stone work was chipped and broken; the balustrade had lost many of its balls, which lay mouldering in the long grass that grew up to the very walls. Moss and lichen and stone-crop clothed all, and the creepers which clung about the house itself were wild and tangled, and in many cases had completely overgrown the very windows, so that scarce a trace of them could be seen.

Yet even in its decay the old house was strangely beautiful, and Grey's heart was stirred to its depths. He wandered through the tangled garden, and out towards the fish-ponds beyond and then by a winding pathway he made his way to the churchyard, and stood bare-headed at his mother's grave.

"I will win it back, mother; I will win it back!" He spoke the words aloud, in a low-toned, earnest voice. "You loved the place, and you taught me to love it. For that alone I would seek to call it one day mine own. I will win it back, and methinks your heart will rejoice when your son is ruling there at last."

Grey had meant to leave that very day; but there was much he longed to see, and his kinsman had given him an earnest invitation to pass the night beneath the old roof-tree. Repugnant as this man was to him, and bitterly as he resented his conduct and distrusted his motives, it was not in the young man's nature to be churlish. Every hour of daylight he spent wandering about the place, revisiting his boyish haunts, and chatting with old Jock, who, without being able to give any exact reason for it, distrusted and despised the present master as heartily as Grey himself.

"The old master did too, at the last. I am main sure of it," he said; "else for why should he have given me yon box, sir? And why should he have bidden me hide it and guard it, and let none see it till Sir Grey should claim it himself? For years he had thought him a friend; but I trow he knew him for a false one at the last. You'll best him yet, Sir Grey – see if you don't. A villain always outwits himself in the end. You'll be master here one day, please God, or my name's not Jock Jarvis!"

Grey had taken out the casket, and found that it contained three hundred golden guineas – the remnant of his father's fortune, and all that he had been able to preserve to his son of what had once been a fine estate. A few words cautioned Grey to be careful of the hoard, and let no one know of its existence – "no one" plainly meaning his kinsman. It also contained a few faintly traced words of farewell, and just a plea for forgiveness – evidently written when mortal weakness was upon the writer – which brought sudden tears to the eyes of the son, and blotted out the bitterness of heart which had been growing up as he mused upon his fallen fortunes and his lost inheritance.

That evening Grey supped with his kinsman in a corner of the despoiled library, which seemed the only room in the house now lived in. He had walked through some of the other state apartments, denuded of their pictures and the best of the furniture, and looking ghostlike with closed shutters and overgrown windows. He had not had heart to pursue his investigations far; and all that he carried away with him were saddened memories, and one little mouldering volume of poems, with his mother's name on the fly leaf, which he had found lying in a corner of the little room with the sunny oriel, where she had passed the greater part of her time. He thought he even remembered the book in her hands; and he slipped it into his breast as though it were some great treasure. The sneering smile of his kinsman as he bade him keep the volume, and saw where he placed it, did not endear him any the more. He wished he could get rid of his companionship, but that seemed impossible; and Grey soon gave up the tour of the house, and let himself be led back to the library.

"No, I have no plans," he said briefly, as they sat at their frugal supper, to which, in honour of the occasion, a small flagon of wine had been added. "I think I shall remain in England. I have been a wanderer something too long. A homely saying tells us that the rolling stone gathers no moss. I have youth and health and strength, and the world lies before me. Men have won success with more against them before this, and why not I?"

"I should have thought the battlefield would have tempted you. There is honour and renown to be won there, to say nothing of the spoils of a vanquished foe," spoke Mr. Dumaresq, looking at him in a peering, crafty fashion. "Surely a gallant young gentleman of your birth and training would not lack for opportunities of distinction amid the perils and glories of war!"

Suddenly Grey became aware that his kinsman was anxious for him to go and fight in the cause of the Allies. It could not be that he had heard of the happy chance which had made Marlborough his friend, for he had spoken of that to none; and even if Dicon had boasted to old Jock, neither cared to have aught to do with the deaf and cross-grained serving-man who waited upon the master within

doors. A moment more and Grey had found the clue, and realized that his own death would make Bartholomew Dumaresq not only absolute master of Hartsbourne, but a baronet to boot; and in every battle thousands of brave soldiers were left dead upon the field, whilst many fell victim to wounds and the ravages of disease caught during the hard weeks of campaigning.

"I think I shall remain in England," he answered quietly. "I have seen something of war, but a career of peace has more attractions for me;" and he smiled to see the look of chagrin which played for a moment over the crafty face of his kinsman.

Grey did not find it easy to sleep when he had climbed up into the great canopied bed in the guest chamber allotted to him. He scarcely remembered this room. It was very large, and before he went to rest Grey drew aside all the mouldering draperies from the windows, and opened every casement wide to the summer night. Even so the place felt musty. There were strange creakings and groanings of the furniture, and the owls without hooted and hissed in the ivy wreaths. More than one bat flew in and out, circling over his head in uncanny flight; and had it not been that the previous night had been an almost sleepless one, Grey would scarce have closed an eye. As it was, he grew drowsy gradually, and felt a strange swimming in his head to which he was a stranger. He was just wondering whether the wine he had taken at supper, the taste of which seemed curious to him at the time, could have anything to do with this, when sleep suddenly fell upon him like a pall, and for a space he could not gauge he remained lapped in the unconsciousness of oblivion.

What was it roused him? Or was he indeed awake? The moonlight streamed into the room, and lay like bars upon the floor. Its radiance was sufficient to light every corner of the room, and Grey found himself lying still as a stone, yet sweeping every corner with his gaze, for surely he was not alone. He felt some presence close beside him, yet where could it be?

Suddenly his gaze travelled upwards, and for a few awful seconds he lay gazing as the bird before the gaze of the snake.

A shining poniard hung, as it were, over his head. He saw the gleaming silver of the blade. Its haft was grasped by a hand – a lean, claw-like hand. Its point was aimed at his own heart.

For a few endless seconds Grey lay staring up helplessly. Then the blade moved swiftly downwards. With a motion as swift, the young man threw himself sidewise out of bed and upon the floor, and turning, sprang to his feet to meet the murderous foe.

Behold there was nothing! He was alone in the great moonlit room. The curtains behind the bed's head were slightly shaken – nothing more.

Horrified and bewildered, Grey dashed them aside. Behind was a wall panelled like the rest of the room in black oak. Was it his fancy, or had he heard just as he sprang to his feet the click as of a closing spring? Grey passed his hand over and over the woodwork, but could find nothing to give a clue. Old memories of secret sliding panels, unknown passages to hiding-places, and ghostly visitants to sleeping guests, rose in succession before him. But this was something more than an ordinary ghostly visitor. Grey saw again the murderous gleam of cold steel over his head – saw the claw-like hand in its faded russet sleeve, the fierce downward sweep of the weapon.

"It was my kinsman, and he sought to do me to death – here in the haunted chamber, where perhaps some infernal machinery exists whereby the corpse could have been quickly and quietly removed and heard of no more. Who would care save Dicon, and what could a poor varlet like that do if the master of Hartsbourne were to assert that his kinsman had ridden off in the early hours of the morning, he knew not whither? Did he drug the wine? Was this in his head all the while? Or was the idea suggested only by my refusal to place my neck in peril at the wars? O Barty, Barty Dumaresq, a pretty villain art thou! Before this I might perhaps have been tempted to return to the Duke, and seek to win my spurs at his side; but now – no. I will take the safer, if the slower, path to fame and fortune, and I will live to make you rue the day you sought to rid yourself, by secret assassination, of the man in whose shoes you hope some day to stand."

CHAPTER IV. ON THE ROAD

With the first streak of midsummer dawn Grey Dumaresq was in the paddock, looking well to the condition of his horse, and grooming the soft, satin coat lovingly with his own hands.

"We must be up and away, my beauty, ere the sun be high. This is no place for either you or me, albeit every foot of ground is mine own, and it will go hard if I let that weasel-faced scoundrel filch it altogether from me. I know him now in his true colours. Heaven send the day may come when I shall repay with interest that which I owe him."

The horse tossed his head and neighed as though in response; and perhaps Dicon heard the sound from where he slept, for almost at once he was at his master's side; and old Jock came cautiously out by the doorway leading towards the house, and looked relieved and gratified to see the young master abroad.

"Eh, but I have been sore troubled with bad dreams this night," he said, as he shambled up. "Yon house is full of such, I take it. How slept you, my master? and how fare you this morn? It is good to see you looking so spruce and sound. Bad luck to the dreams that drove sleep from my pillow at last."

"I had my dreams too, Jock, and I have not slept since," answered Grey, with a significant glance at the old man. "Tell me, good fellow, what know you of the panelled guest-chamber, with the row of windows looking south over the park? Ha! why look you so, man? What know you of the chamber?"

"Did he put you there, my master? Then Peter lied to me, the false-tongued knave. If I had known that! No wonder the dreams were bad that came to me. The haunted room! Tush! it is not ghosts that hurt, but men who come and go at will and leave no trace behind."

"I thought so," spoke Grey composedly. "Then there is a secret way of entrance into that room?"

"Ay, behind the bed. I do not know the trick, but I have heard of it. Men have been done to death in that room ere this, and none the wiser for it. Oh if I had but known!"

Grey's eyes were fixed full upon the pallid face of the old man. He put the next question gravely and almost sternly.

"Tell me truly, my friend. Think you that this kinsman of mine would plot to do me hurt? He made profession of friendship."

"He made the same to Sir Hugh," answered Jock in a trembling voice, "and for long the master believed in him. But methinks he never would have died as he did, had he not come to live here with Mr. Barty at Hartsbourne."

Grey started and changed colour, clinching his hand,

"You think that this kinsman of ours compassed his death?"

Jock looked over his shoulder as though fearful of listening ears. He drew a step nearer; and Dicon, with fallen jaw and staring eyes, came up close to listen.

"How can I tell? I was seldom in the house. I work in the garden, and because I am a cheap servant, asking no money, but making a pittance by what I can sell, Mr. Barty has kept me here where he found me. But when the old master came, he often sent for me. Before he became too ill, he sometimes crawled to my little cottage yonder for a bit of chat. He told me the doctors and leeches told him he had but to rest and live simply in the country for a few years to be a sound man again. But for all that he dwindled and dwindled away, and was gone in two months."

"Did no leech attend him here?" asked Grey breathlessly.

"Not till the very last, when they sent me to Edgeware to fetch one who could do naught. Mr. Barty professed to know many cures, and the master believed in him. He eased his pain, but he sank into an ever-increasing, ever-mastering drowsiness, and he shrank away to skin and bone. It went to

my heart to see him. Many's the time when I have wondered whether it would have ended so if he had not taken Mr. Barty's simples and draughts."

"Was he poisoned, then?" asked Grey, between his shut teeth.

Jock looked nervously over his shoulder; the word seemed to frighten him. He shook his old head from side to side.

"Nay, nay, how can I tell – a poor old ignorant man like me? But he used to say that you would likely never come home again (travellers met such a deal of peril, he would say), and then his eyes would gleam and glisten, for there was but the old master's life and yours betwixt him and the title and all."

Grey ground his teeth, and his eyes flashed. Somehow he did not doubt for a moment that foul play had been used to compass his father's death. Had he not escaped assassination himself that night only by the skin of his teeth?

"Could any man living throw light upon this matter?" he asked. "The leech from Edgeware, or any other?"

"I misdoubt me if any could, save wall-eyed Peter, Mr. Barty's man; and I trow his master makes it worth while for him to hold his tongue and know nothing."

"Gold will sometimes unloose a miscreant's tongue."

"Ay, ay, maybe; but Mr. Barty's purse is longer than yours, Sir Grey, and his mind is crookeder and his ways more artful. Don't you go for to anger him yet: hurt might come to you an you did. Get you gone from the place, and that right soon; for the sooner you leave Hartsbourne behind you, the safer it will be for you."

"Yes, my master; let us indeed be gone," pleaded Dicon earnestly. "This is a God-forsaken hole, not fit for you to dwell in. Take the store of gold pieces, and let us begone, for I trow that harm will come to you if you linger longer here."

It took little to persuade Grey to be off and away. Old Jock provided them with a meal, and they could break their fast at the old inn at Edgeware, through which they would pass. He had no desire to go through the farce of a farewell to his kinsman. He only desired to shake off the dust of his feet against him; and ere the chimes of the church rang out the hour of six, Grey was turning on the crest of a ridge of rising ground, to look his last for the nonce upon the old home he had dreamed of so many a time, and round which so many loving thoughts centred.

"Let kind Fortune but smile upon me, Dicon, and show me the way to affluence and fame, and I will yet be lord and master there, and the manor of Hartsbourne shall be one of the fairest in the land!"

"Why, so you shall, Sir Grey, and that right speedily!" cried honest Dick, who had an unbounded admiration for his young master, and an immense confidence in his luck, albeit no special good fortune had befallen him since he had taken service with him.

Dick had led a seafaring life during his earlier years, and Grey had picked him up in a shipwrecked, ragged, and starving condition on the coast of Spain some two years previously. In those days ship-wrecked sailors often had a hard time of it, even though the terrors of the galleys or the Inquisition did not loom quite so perilously before them as had been the case a century before. To find himself taken into the service of a young English gentleman of quality, and to be the companion of his travels, had been a piece of luck that Dick thanked Providence for every day of his life. He had been one of four servants at the outset; but as Grey's resources diminished, or his roving life took him into perils for which some men had little stomach, he gradually lost his retinue, till, for the past year, Dick alone had followed him, and the two had become friends and comrades, as well as master and servant. Now at their first halting-place, where they paused to let the horses breathe after a steady half-hour's gallop, Grey opened the wallet at his side, which he had filled with gold pieces from the casket (the rest he had sewn carefully into his clothes for safety), and counted out a certain number, which he shook in his fist as he spoke.

"Dicon, I am going to London to try my luck there. But, as I have oftentimes heard, fortunes are as easily lost there as won, wherefore it may be that I shall become a beggar instead of growing in wealth and greatness."

"Heaven forbid!" ejaculated Dick in passionate protest.

"Well, Heaven watches over the undeserving as well as the virtuous, so there is e'en hope for me," answered Grey with his winning smile. "But look ye here, Dicon. You have been a faithful rogue, and have served me well, and I hope we may company together many a long day yet. But inasmuch as there are uncertainties in life, and we are going forth into a new world, where perchance I may sink rather than swim, I desire to give you six months' wage in advance, whilst I have my pockets lined with gold, so that should any untoward chance befall me, as it has befallen better men than myself, I shall not have to turn you adrift unrewarded, nor will you, if you can be a wise varlet, and husband your resources, be thrown on the world without some means of support."

Dick seemed about to protest, but either the look on his master's face or some idea which had entered his own head held him silent. He took the coins without counting them, and producing a greasy leathern pouch, such as sailors often carry with them, he dropped the gold pieces into it one by one, tied it up, and fastened it safely in an inner pocket.

"That pouch stuck by me when I lost everything else in the world, and well-nigh my own life," said the fellow with a grin. "My mother did give it me when I first went to sea, and she told me as a wise witch woman had given it her. She thought 'twas the caul of a child; and like enough it be, for salt water never hurts it, and I was the only one saved of all the crew that went down off the Spanish coast. I'd sooner part with the gold pieces than with the pouch that holds them."

They both rode on with thoughtful faces after this brief interlude. Grey was turning over a dozen different schemes in his mind; but all were vague and chimerical. Now and again he looked at an amethyst ring upon his finger, and it came over him that the shortest cut to fortune might be to present himself as a suppliant for favour at the feet of the great Duchess of Marlborough, who was said to rule the Queen with a rod of iron, and whose known devotion to her husband would be certain to raise high in her favour any person who had rendered him so timely a service as that which Grey had been able to offer on the day of Ramillies.

But then, again, it seemed to Grey that to claim reward for that chance service, which had cost him nothing, was little better than playing the beggar or the sycophant. There was in his nature a strong strain of chivalrous romance – of love of adventure for its own sake, without thought of reward or favour. That encounter with the great Duke, the interview which had followed, the consciousness that he had done his country a notable service that day – all these things were very sweet to him, forming an episode pleasant to look back upon. If he now presented himself on the strength of it as a petitioner for place or favour, at once the whole thing would be vulgarized – he would be lowered in his own estimation, sinking to the level of one of the crowd of greedy flatterers and place-hunters who thronged the antechambers of the rich and great, and fawned upon them for the crumbs of patronage which they were able to dispense as the price of this homage.

Grey had seen this sort of thing at foreign courts, and his soul had sickened at it. Doubtless, in this great world of London it was the same. As a baronet, a young man of parts, with an attractive person, and, at present, a well-filled purse, he might not improbably please the fancy of the Duchess, and obtain some post in her household or about the Court that would give him a chance at least to rise. But the more he thought of this the less he liked the idea, and at last he flung it from him in scorn.

"I would sooner live in Grub Street, and drive a quill!" he said half aloud. "I could praise a hero with my pen, but I cannot fawn and flatter with my lips. And methinks I am not fit for the life of a place-man: I have been too long mine own master. Surely there are ways by which a man may rise in the world without abasing himself in his own esteem first. I will go to London, and look about me with open eyes. There are the world of politics, the world of art and literature, and the theatre of war, if other spheres should fail. Surely there must be a place for me somewhere; but I will not choose the

latter if I can help it. I fear not death on mine own account; but I desire to live, and to grow rich, that I may square matters with yonder villain, and avenge upon him my father's untimely death!"

For that his father had been in some sort done to death by his false kinsman, Grey did not now doubt, though whether he would be able to bring that crime home to him later, he could not at present surmise. Much might be possible to a man with friends in high places; but these would have to be found and won ere any step could be taken.

Grey often felt within himself the stirrings of ambition. He had shown promise of something akin to genius in his Oxford days, and there had not been lacking those among his companions and tutors who had declared that he could win fame and fortune through academic laurels. But Grey had then turned a deaf ear to such propositions. He desired to travel and see the world, and he had done this with much zest. But the muse within had not been altogether silent, and he had many times covered sheets of paper with flowing stanzas or stately sonnets, which bore witness to the fire that burned within. His pencil, too, was not without cunning; and his study of the treasures of many an art gallery, many a foreign church, had given him knowledge and culture beyond what the average gallant of the day could boast. The double strand in his nature was very marked – a reckless love of adventure, and a delicate appreciation of the beautiful. Often he longed after the days of the early troubadours, when the two walked hand in hand. He pondered these matters in his busy brain as he rode onward in the sunny brightness of the June morning, and found it in his heart to wish that he was not thus possessed by such conflicting passions. He felt he would have had a better chance of success had his bent in any one direction been more decided.

They pulled up at the quaint old inn at Edgeware, and rode into the courtyard, where lackeys and hostlers were making merry together, and where some handsome horses were being groomed down, prior to being put into the cumbersome but very handsome coach that stood beneath the protecting galleries which ran round the court. The lackeys wore a livery of snuff-coloured cloth, with a quantity of gold lace about it. The panels of the coach were snuff-coloured, and there was much heavy gilding about it, which was being polished with great zeal by the servants of the inn. It was plainly the equipage of some person of quality, and had evidently put up there for the night, but was likely to be wanted shortly for the road again.

Grey dismounted, and leaving Dick in charge of the horses, made his way in through the low-browed entrance, along a sanded passage, and so to the public room, the door of which stood open. As a boy he had known this house, and it still seemed familiar to him, though it had changed hands since he had been there last, and his face was not known to mine host.

"Your pardon, sir," spoke this functionary, bustling forward on his entrance, "but this room is bespoken for my Lord Sandford. If you are wanting a meal, it shall be quickly served elsewhere – "

But at that moment a rollicking voice from the foot of the adjacent staircase broke in upon the excuses of the host.

"Gadzooks, man, but it shall be nothing of the sort. Set a cover for the gentleman at my table. Gosh! is a man so enamoured of his own company that he must needs drive all the world away? – Come in, sir, come in, and take pot-luck with me. – Landlord, see you give us of your best, or I'll spit you on your own jack! I've a great thirst on me, mind you; and let the dishes be done to a turn. – Take a seat in the window, sir; the air blows fresh and pleasant, but it will be infernally hot ere noon. I must be off and away in good time. In London streets you can find shade; but these country roads – hang them all! – get like What's-his-name's fiery furnace seven times heated if they don't chance to run through forest land!"

The speaker was a young man of perhaps seven-and-twenty, though reckless dissipation had traced lines in his face which should not so early have been there. He was dressed according to the most extravagant fashion of the day, with an immense curled wig, that hung half-way down his back; a coat of velvet, richly laced, the sleeves so short that the spotless lawn and ruffles of the shirt showed half-way up the forearm; a wonderful embroidered vest, knee breeches of satin equally gorgeous, and

silk stockings elaborately gartered below the knee with bands of gold lace. He carried a fashionably cocked hat beneath his arm, with a gold-headed cane; and a small muff was suspended from his neck by gold chains. The muff held a golden snuff-box, with a picture on the lid which modesty would refuse to describe; and the young spark took snuff and interlarded his talk with the fashionable oaths of the day as a matter of course.

He looked curiously at Grey when they had taken their seats; for the traveller, though dressed with exceeding simplicity, and wearing his own hair in loose, natural curls, just framing his face and touching his shoulders, was so evidently a man of culture and of gentle blood that the dandy was both impressed and perplexed by him. For high-bred look and instinctive nobility of bearing Lord Sandford could not hold a candle to Grey Dumaresq.

"I saw you ride into the yard just now. Fine horse that of yours, sir – very fine horse! If he's ever for sale, mind you let me know of him. Lord Sandford – your very humble servant – always to be heard of at Will's Coffee House or the Mohawk Club. Seem to remember your face; but dash me if I can give it a name. Awful memory for names I have – know too many fellows, I suppose. Not that there are so many like you, either; but hang me, I must have met you somewhere before."

Grey had caught the fleeting memory, and answered at once, —

"We were at Oxford together, my lord. Not at the same college, though; but we have met, doubtless. My name is Grey Dumaresq – "

"Why, to be sure. Gad! but that's strange! Thought I wasn't wrong about a face! I heard you spout forth a poem once. Lord, it was fine, though I didn't understand one word in ten! Latin or Greek – rabbit me if I know which! And I knew your father, too; met him in London now and again. He's not been seen anywhere these eight or nine months."

"My father died last Christmas," spoke Grey gravely. "I did not know it myself, being abroad." And led on by Lord Sandford's questions, which, if not very delicately put, showed a real interest in the subject, Grey gave him a bare outline of his own life since quitting Oxford, and of the position in which he now found himself.

"Oddsfish, man – as our merry monarch of happy memory used to say – but yours is a curious tale. The ladies will rave over the romance of it – coupled with that face of yours. Oh, never say die, man! You've the world before you. What more do you ask than such a face, such a story, and a few hundred pounds in your pocket? Why, with decent luck, those hundreds ought to make thousands in a very short time. You trust yourself to me, my young friend. I know my London. I know the ropes. I will show you how fortunes are made in a night; and you shall be the pet of the ladies and the envy of the beaux before another month has passed. We will find you an heiress for a wife, and – heigh, presto! – the thing is done."

Grey started, and made a gesture as of repulsion, whereat Lord Sandford roared with laughter; and there was something so heartwhole and infectious in his laugh that Grey found himself joining in almost without knowing it. The man had a strong personality, that was not to be doubted, and at this moment Grey felt himself singularly lonely, singularly perplexed about his own immediate future. He did not know London. He had scarcely set foot within its precincts, save on the occasion when he went to bid his father farewell, and when it seemed to him that he stepped into Pandemonium itself. Since then he had visited many foreign capitals, and had accustomed himself to the life there to some extent; but only to the life of a traveller – an onlooker. Now he felt that something more lay before him – that it was as a citizen and a unit in the great hive that he must go. And how to steer his bark through the shoals and quicksands of the new life, he had very small idea. To win fame and fortune was his wish; but how were these good things to be achieved? Never had it entered his head to look upon marriage as a way of gaining either.

"Zounds, man, don't look like that! Better men than you or I have not been shamed to thank their wives for their promotion. But there are more ways of killing a cat than hanging. We'll look about and see. You put yourself in my hands, and I'll show you the ropes. No, no; no thanks. I want

some diversion myself. Poor Tom Gregory, my boon companion, made a fool of himself over the wine the other night, and got spitted like a cockchafer by Captain Dashwood. I've felt bad ever since. I tried what a trip into the country would do for me. But dash it all, I can't stand the dreariness of it. I am on my way back to town as fast as may be. And you shall come with me. Nay, I'll take no denial. A man must have something to do with his time, or he'll get into a pretty peck of mischief. I've taken a liking to you; and I always get my own way, because I won't listen to objections."

So an hour later, when the coach rumbled out from under the archway of the old inn, Grey Dumaresq sat within by Lord Sandford's side, and Dick, with a puzzled but satisfied face, led his master's horse behind.

CHAPTER V. A HIGH-BORN DAME

Westward from Whitehall, just after one had left behind the streets and lanes of the fashionable westerly portion of London town, and emerged into a fair region of smiling meadows, blossoming fruit-trees, orchards, and woodlands, were in those days to be found many pleasant and stately houses, varying in size and splendour according to the condition of the owner, but fair mansions for the most part, and inhabited by persons of quality, many of whom held posts at Court, and found this proximity to Whitehall a matter of no small convenience.

Some of the fairest and seemliest of these mansions were those which lay along the river banks, with gardens terraced to the water's edge, where light wherries could deposit gay gallants at the foot of the steps leading to the wide gravelled walks, and where a gay panorama of shipping could be seen by those who paced the shady walks, or sat in the little temples and bowers which made a feature of so many of these gardens.

There was one house in particular that in these days had a notoriety of its own. It had been an old manor house in the time when London had not extended so far to the west, and it lay embosomed in a quaint old garden, where fair and tall trees made a pleasant shade through the hot summer days, where the turf was emerald green and soft to the foot, and roses flourished in wild abundance. Now there was a formal Dutch garden set in the midst of the old-time wilderness, where clipped box edges divided the parterres of brilliant-hued blossoms sent from Holland, and where nymphs disported themselves around marble fountains, and heathen divinities on pedestals kept watch and ward over the long terraces which lined the margin of the river. But in spite of these innovations of modern taste, the silvan charm of the old garden had by no means been destroyed, and there were many who declared that not even Hampton Court itself could hold a candle to Lord Romaine's riverside garden for beauty and brightness and the nameless fascination which defies analysis. Lord Romaine was accounted a rising man. The friend of Marlborough and Godolphin, a moderate Whig in politics, a courtier above all else, and loyal to the backbone, he had been regarded with favour by the late King, who had given him some appointment about the Court, which had been confirmed by the Queen on her accession. And although Queen Anne was herself of such strong Tory leanings, she was beginning to find that the moderate Whigs were the men most useful and most to be depended upon; and the shrewd Duchess Sarah – her dear "Mrs. Freeman" – herself a convert from high Tory principles to those of their moderate opponents, was using her influence steadily and strongly to bring the Queen round to the same state of mind.

So Lord Romaine's star was likely to rise with the rising tide of Whig supremacy; and as he was a man of very large private means, and kept open house in a lavish fashion, it was likely enough that he would make his mark in the world. It would be certainly no fault of his wife if he did not.

Truth to tell, Lady Romaine's head had been somewhat turned when, three years before, her husband succeeded to his father's title and estates, and from being Viscount Latimer, with moderate means and only a measure of Court favour to depend upon, became an earl with a very large rent-roll, and a great fortune in ready money, which his father, who lived a secluded existence in the country, had amassed during the later years of his life. As Lord and Lady Latimer this couple had lived at the riverside house they still occupied when in town; but it had not then worn the aspect that it did to-day, albeit the garden had been something of a hobby to its owner for many years.

The lady cared little for the garden, save for the admiration it aroused in others; but she longed with a mighty longing to furbish up the old house after her own design, and as soon as the funds for this were in their hands, not a moment was lost in the carrying out of her cherished plans and projects. With a rapidity that astonished the town, a great new front was added to the old building,

converting it into a quadrangle, in the centre of which a great fountain threw its waters high into the air. All the new rooms were large, stately, and imposing, and furnished according to the latest mode. Inlaid cabinets from the far East, crammed with curios of which my lady knew not even the names; crooked-legged chairs and sofas of French make; furniture in the new mahogany wood, just beginning to attract attention and admiration; rich carpets and hangings from India, Persia, or China; embroideries from all quarters of the globe; Italian pottery, Spanish inlaid armour, silver trinkets from Mexico, feather work from the isles of the west – all these things, jostled and jumbled together in rich confusion, made Lady Romaine's new house the talk of the town; and her tall powdered lackeys and turbaned negro pages were more numerous and more sumptuously attired than those of any other fashionable dame of her acquaintance.

My lady was at her toilet upon this brilliant June morning; and as custom permitted the attendance of gentlemen at this function, in the case of married ladies, the hall and staircase leading up to her suite of private apartments were already thronged by a motley crew.

There were dandies, fresh from their own elaborate toilets, reeking of the perfume in which they had bathed themselves, displaying in their own persons all the hues of the rainbow, and all the extravagant fripperies of the day, laughing and jesting together as they mounted the softly-carpeted stairs, their cocked hats under their arms, or descended again after having paid their *devoirs* to my lady, often cackling with mirth over some *bon mot* they had heard or uttered. There were chattering French milliners or French hair-dressers, with boxes or bundles of laces, silks, perfumes, or trinkets, wherewith to tempt the fancy of their patroness. There were gaily-dressed pages running to and fro with scented notes; turbaned negro boys carrying a lap-dog or monkey or parrot to the doting mistress, who had suddenly sent for one of her pets. Tire-women pushed themselves through the throng, intent on the business of the toilet, which was such an all-absorbing matter; and the whole house seemed to ring with the loud or shrill laughter and the ceaseless chatter of this motley throng, bent on killing time in the most approved fashion.

Some of the dandies about to depart, who were sipping chocolate from cups of priceless Sèvres china, and talking in their free, loose fashion with each other, kept looking about them as though in hope or expectation, and more than once the name of "Lady Geraldine" was bandied about between them. One young blood asked point blank why she was never to be seen at her mother's toilet. A laugh broke from his companions.

"If it's Lady Geraldine you come to see, you can save yourself the trouble of the visit. They say she was brought up by a Puritan grandmother, who died last year, and left her all her fortune. However that may be, the Lady Geraldine never appears when she can escape doing so. My lady gives way to her. They say she does not care to have a grown-up daughter at her heels, she who might pass for four-and-twenty herself any day, but for that damning evidence. But they say the father is beginning to declare that his daughter is no longer to be kept in the background. I suppose the next thing will be that they will marry her to some young nobleman. Gadzooks! with that face and that fortune – if the fortune be not a clever myth – they ought not to find it a difficult task!"

"I heard it said at the club that Sandford was the favoured suitor for the hand of Lady Geraldine," said one young exquisite, speaking with a lisp and taking snuff.

There was a laugh from the group of men standing by.

"Oh, Sandford is my lady's favourite! They say he is a kinsman; and he amuses her vastly, and gives her all the homage her heart desires. But Lord Romaine may have something to say to that. Sandford is going the pace that kills, and is playing old Harry with his fortune and estate. And as for my Lady Geraldine – well, 'tis said the pretty little Puritan will look at none of us. Split me! but it will be a pretty comedy to watch! The awakening of Aphrodite; isn't that the thing to call it? But Aphrodite is not generally credited with much coyness – ha, ha, ha! Perhaps it is but a pose on the part of the pretty maid. The sweet creatures are so artful in these days, one can never be too cautious." And a roar of laughter answered this sally, caution being about the last quality ever cultivated by the speaker.

Whilst all this was going on within doors, the object of these latter remarks was enjoying a silvan solitude in the most secluded portion of the beautiful old garden.

Far away from the house, far out of earshot of all the fashionable clamour resounding there, set in the midst of a dense shrubbery of ilex and yew, was an arbour – itself cut out of a giant yew-tree – commanding a view of a portion of the river, slipping by its alder-crowned banks, and overlooking a small, square lawn, sunk between high turf walls, in the centre of which stood an ancient moss-grown sundial, whose quaintly-lettered face was a source of unending interest to the fair girl, who had made of this remote and sheltered place a harbour of refuge for herself.

She was seated now just within the arbour, an open book of poetry upon her knee; but she was not reading, for her chin rested in the palm of her hand, as she leaned forward in an unstudied attitude of grace, her elbow on her knee, her wonderful dark eyes fixed full upon the shining river, a dreamy smile of haunting sweetness playing round her lips. At her feet a great hound lay extended, his nose upon his paws, his eyes often lifted to the face of his mistress, his ears pricked at the smallest sound, even at the snapping of a twig. Nobody could surprise the Lady Geraldine when she had this faithful henchman at her side.

The girl was dressed with extreme simplicity for the times she lived in, when hoops were coming in, stiff brocades, laces and lappets, high-heeled coloured shoes, and every extravagance in finery all the rage. True, the texture of her white silk gown was of the richest, and it was laced with silver, and fastened with pearl clasps that must have cost a great sum; but it was fashioned with a simplicity that suggested the rustic maiden rather than the high-born dame. Yet the simple elegance of the graceful, girlish figure was displayed to such advantage that even the modish mother had been able to find no fault with the fashion in which her daughter instructed that her gowns should be cut; and surmises and bets were freely exchanged by the gallants crowding Lord Romaine's house as to whether it were a deep form of coquetry or real simplicity of taste which made the Lady Geraldine differ so much from the matrons and maids about her.

She wore no patches upon her face, though the dazzling purity of her complexion would thereby have been enhanced. And in days when the hair was dressed into tower-like erections, and adorned with powder, laces, ribbons, and all manner of strange fripperies, this girl wore her beautiful waving golden tresses floating round her face in the fashion of the ladies of Charles the Second's reign, or coiled them with careless grace about her head in a natural coronet. With powder or pomatum, wires or artificial additions, she would have nothing to do. She had been brought up in the country by her grandmother, a lady of very simple tastes, who would in no wise conform to the extravagant fashions which had crept in, and were corrupting all the old-time grace and simplicity of female attire.

"Leave those fripperies to the gallants," had been the old lady's pungent remark; "what do we want with powder and periwigs, patches and pomatum?"

She remembered the simple elegance of the court-dresses of the ladies in the Stuart times, and had no patience with the artificial trappings that followed. Moreover, albeit not a Puritan in any strict sense of the word – being a loyal advocate of the Stuart cause – she was a woman of great piety and devotion, and studied her Bible diligently; so that she took small pleasure in the adornment of the person in gaudy clothing, and the broidering of the hair, and in fine array. She taught her granddaughter to think more of the virtue of the meek and quiet spirit, and to seek rather to cultivate her mind, and store it with information and with lofty aspirations, than to give her time and thoughts to the round of folly and dissipation which made up the life of the lady of fashion.

Geraldine was so happy in the care of her grandmother, and felt so little at home with her fashionable mother, that her visits had been few and far between hitherto, until the sudden death of Mrs. Adair six months previously had obliged her to return permanently to her father's roof.

Here she found a state of things which amazed and troubled her not a little, and greatly did she marvel how her mother could be the daughter of the guardian of her childhood. True, Lady Romaine had married very young, and early escaped from the watchful care of her judicious mother;

but it seemed marvellous that so close a tie could have existed between them, and the girl would look on with amaze and pain at her mother's freaks and follies, wondering how any woman could find entertainment in the idle, foolish, and often profane vapourings of the beaux who fluttered about her, and how any sane persons could endure such a life of trivial amusement and ceaseless meaningless dissipation.

Pleading with her father her grief at her grandmother's death, she had obtained a six months' respite from attendance at the gay functions which made up life to Lady Romaine. Those six months had been spent, for the most part, in the privacy of her own apartments, which she had furnished with the dim and time-honoured treasures of her grandmother's house, all of which were now her own, and which made her quarters in the old part of the house like an oasis of taste, and harmony, and true beauty in an ocean of confused and almost tawdry profusion. The old garden was another favourite haunt of hers, for there were portions of it which were seldom invaded by the gay butterflies who often hovered about the newer terraces and the formal Dutch garden, and the hound always gave her ample warning of any approaching footstep, so that she could fly and hide herself before any one could molest her.

So here she prosecuted her studies, read her favourite authors, and when the house was quiet – her mother having flown off to some gay rout or card-party or ball – she would practise her skill on the lute, virginal, spinet, or harp, and her fresh young voice would resound through the house, drawing the servants to the open windows to hear the sweet strains.

Lady Romaine would have humoured the girl's fancy for seclusion indefinitely. She felt almost humiliated by the presence of a daughter so stately and so mature. Geraldine was nineteen, but might have passed for more, with her grave, refined beauty, and her lack of all the kittenish freakishness which made many matrons seem almost like girls, even when their charms began to fade, and nature had to be replaced by art. Lady Romaine fondly believed that her admirers took her for four-and-twenty; and now to have to pose as the mother of a grown-up daughter was a bitter mortification, and one which disposed her to make as speedy a marriage for Geraldine as could well be achieved. Lord Romaine had at last insisted that his daughter should appear in the world of fashion, and she had been once or twice to Court in her parents' train, where her striking beauty and unwonted appearance had made some sensation. Geraldine had little fault to find with what she saw and heard there. Good Queen Anne permitted nothing reprehensible in her neighbourhood, and her Court was grave to the verge of dullness. She was a loving and a model wife; and the Duchess was devoted to her husband, though often making his life a burden by her imperious temper. Anything like conjugal infidelity was not tolerated therefore by either of these ladies, and decorum ruled wherever the Queen was to be found.

But at other places and in other company matters were far different, and already Geraldine began to shrink with a great disgust and distaste from the compliments she received, from the coarse, foolish, affected talk she heard, and from the knowledge of the senseless dissipation which flowed like a stream at her feet, and which seemed to encircle the span of her life in a way that made escape impossible.

But she had been taught obedience as one of the cardinal virtues, and the days of emancipated daughters were not yet. When her father bade her lay aside her mourning and join in the life of the house, she knew she must obey. But she had asked from him the favour of being permitted to design her own dresses, and to follow her own tastes in matters pertaining to her own toilet, and also that she might be excused attendance at her mother's morning levee; for the spectacle of crowds of men flocking in and out of her mother's apartments, and witnessing the triumphs of the coiffeurs and tire-women, was to her degrading and disgusting; and though Lord Romaine laughed – being himself so inured to the custom – and told her she was a little fool, and must get the better of her prudery, he gave way to her in this, and the more readily because she represented to him how that these morning

hours were now the only ones she could command for study; and he was proud to find in his daughter an erudition and talent very rare amongst women in those days.

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