

EMMA ORCZY

THE NEST OF THE
SPARROWHAWK

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Содержание

PART I	5
CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	10
CHAPTER III	13
CHAPTER IV	16
CHAPTER V	20
CHAPTER VI	24
CHAPTER VII	31
CHAPTER VIII	34
CHAPTER IX	37
CHAPTER X	42
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	43

Baroness Emmuska Orczy Orczy The Nest of the Sparrowhawk: A Romance of the XVIIth Century

PART I The Nest of the Sparrowhawk

CHAPTER I THE HOUSE OF A KENTISH SQUIRE

Master Hymn-of-Praise Busy folded his hands before him ere he spoke:

"Nay! but I tell thee, woman, that the Lord hath no love for such frivolities! and alack! but 'tis a sign of the times that an English Squire should favor such evil ways."

"Evil ways? The Lord love you, Master Hymn-of-Praise, and pray do you call half an hour at the skittle alley 'evil ways'?"

"Aye, evil it is to indulge our sinful bodies in such recreation as doth not tend to the glorification of the Lord and the sanctification of our immortal souls."

He who sermonized thus unctuously and with eyes fixed with stern disapproval on the buxom wench before him, was a man who had passed the meridian of life not altogether—it may be surmised—without having indulged in some recreations which had not always the sanctification of his own immortal soul for their primary object. The bulk of his figure testified that he was not averse to good cheer, and there was a certain hidden twinkle underlying the severe expression of his eyes as they rested on the pretty face and round figure of Mistress Charity that did not necessarily tend to the glorification of the Lord.

Apparently, however, the admonitions of Master Hymn-of-Praise made but a scanty impression on the young girl's mind, for she regarded him with a mixture of amusement and contempt as she shrugged her plump shoulders and said with sudden irrelevance:

"Have you had your dinner yet, Master Busy?"

"'Tis sinful to address a single Christian person as if he or she were several," retorted the man sharply. "But I'll tell thee in confidence, mistress, that I have not partaken of a single drop more comforting than cold water the whole of to-day. Mistress de Chavasse mixed the sack-posset with her own hands this morning, and locked it in the cellar, of which she hath rigorously held the key. Ten minutes ago when she placed the bowl on this table, she called my attention to the fact that the delectable beverage came to within three inches of the brim. Meseems I shall have to seek for a less suspicious, more Christian-spirited household, whereon to bestow in the near future my faithful services."

Hardly had Master Hymn-of-Praise finished speaking when he turned very sharply round and looked with renewed sternness—wholly untempered by a twinkle this time—in the direction whence he thought a suppressed giggle had just come to his ears. But what he saw must surely have completely reassured him; there was no suggestion of unseemly ribaldry about the young lad who had been busy laying out the table with spoons and mugs, and was at this moment vigorously—somewhat ostentatiously, perhaps—polishing a carved oak chair, bending to his task in a manner which fully accounted for the high color in his cheeks.

He had long, lanky hair of a pale straw-color, a thin face and high cheek-bones, and was dressed—as was also Master Hymn-of-Praise Busy—in a dark purple doublet and knee breeches, all looking very much the worse for wear; the brown tags and buttons with which these garments had originally been roughly adorned were conspicuous in a great many places by their absence, whilst all those that remained were mere skeletons of their former selves.

The plain collars and cuffs which relieved the dull color of the men's doublets were of singularly coarse linen not beyond reproach as to cleanliness, and altogether innocent of starch; whilst the thick brown worsted stockings displayed many a hole through which the flesh peeped, and the shoes of roughly tanned leather were down at heel and worn through at the toes.

Undoubtedly even in these days of more than primitive simplicity and of sober habiliments Master Hymn-of-Praise Busy, butler at Acol Court in the county of Kent, and his henchman, Master Courage Toogood, would have been conspicuous for the shabbiness and poverty of the livery which they wore.

The hour was three in the afternoon. Outside a glorious July sun spread radiance and glow over an old-fashioned garden, over tall yew hedges, and fantastic forms of green birds and heads of beasts carefully cut and trimmed, over clumps of late roses and rough tangles of marguerites and potentillas, of stiff zinnias and rich-hued snapdragons.

Through the open window came the sound of wood knocking against wood, of exclamations of annoyance or triumph as the game proceeded, and every now and then a ripple of prolonged laughter, girlish, fresh, pure as the fragrant air, clear as the last notes of the cuckoo before he speaks his final farewell to summer.

Every time that echo of youth and gayety penetrated into the oak-raftered dining-room, Master Hymn-of-Praise Busy pursed his thick lips in disapproval, whilst the younger man, had he dared, would no doubt have gone to the window, and leaning out as far as safety would permit, have tried to catch a glimpse of the skittle alley and of a light-colored kirtle gleaming among the trees. But as it was he caught the older man's stern eyes fixed reprovingly upon him, he desisted from his work of dusting and polishing, and, looking up to the heavy oak-beam above him, he said with becoming fervor:

"Lord! how beautifully thou dost speak, Master Busy!"

"Get on with thy work, Master Courage," retorted the other relentlessly, "and mix not thine unruly talk with the wise sayings of thy betters."

"My work is done, Master."

"Go fetch the pasties then, the quality will be in directly," rejoined the other peremptorily, throwing a scrutinizing look at the table, whereon a somewhat meager collation of cherries, raspberries and gooseberries and a more generous bowl of sack-posset had been arranged by Mistress Charity and Master Courage under his own supervision.

"Doubtless, doubtless," here interposed the young maid somewhat hurriedly, desirous perhaps of distracting the grave butler's attention from the mischievous oglings of the lad as he went out of the room, "as you remark—hem—as thou remarkest, this place of service is none to the liking of such as . . . thee . . ."

She threw him a coy glance from beneath well-grown lashes, which caused the saintly man to pass his tongue over his lips, an action which of a surety had not the desire for spiritual glory for its mainspring. With dainty hands Mistress Charity busied herself with the delicacies upon the table. She adjusted a gooseberry which seemed inclined to tumble, heaped up the currants into more graceful pyramids. Womanlike, whilst her eyes apparently followed the motions of her hands they nevertheless took stock of Master Hymn-of-Praise's attitude with regard to herself.

She knew that in defiance of my Lord Protector and all his Puritans she was looking her best this afternoon: though her kirtle was as threadbare as Master Courage's breeches it was nevertheless just short enough to display to great advantage her neatly turned ankle and well-arched foot on which the thick stockings—well-darned—and shabby shoes sat not at all amiss.

Her kerchief was neatly folded, white and slightly starched, her cuffs immaculately and primly turned back just above her round elbow and shapely arm.

On the whole Mistress Charity was pleased with her own appearance. Sir Marmaduke de Chavasse and the mistress were seeing company this afternoon, and the neighboring Kentish squires who had come to play skittles and to drink sack-posset might easily find a less welcome sight than that of the serving maid at Acol Court.

"As for myself," now resumed Mistress Charity, after a slight pause, during which she had felt Master Busy's admiring gaze fixed persistently upon her, "as for myself, I'll seek service with a lady less like to find such constant fault with a hard-working maid."

Master Courage had just returned carrying a large dish heaped up with delicious looking pasties fresh from the oven, brown and crisp with butter, and ornamented with sprigs of burrage which made them appear exceedingly tempting.

Charity took the dish from the lad and heavy as it was, she carried it to the table and placed it right in the very center of it. She rearranged the sprigs of burrage, made a fresh disposition of the baskets of fruit, whilst both the men watched her open-mouthed, agape at so much loveliness and grace.

"And," she added significantly, looking with ill-concealed covetousness at the succulent pasties, "where there's at least one dog or cat about the place."

"I know not, mistress," said Hymn-of-Praise, "that thou wast over-fond of domestic pets . . . 'Tis sinful to . . ."

"La! Master Busy, you . . . hem . . . thou mistakest my meaning. I have no love for such creatures—but without so much as a kitten about the house, prithee how am I to account to my mistress for the pasties and . . . and comfits . . . not to speak of breakages."

"There is always Master Courage," suggested Hymn-of-Praise, with a movement of the left eyelid which in the case of any one less saintly might have been described as a sly wink.

"That there is not," interrupted the lad decisively; "my stomach rebels against comfits, and sack-posset could never be laid to my door."

"I give thee assurance, Master Busy," concluded the young girl, "that the county of Kent no longer suits my constitution. 'Tis London for me, and thither will I go next year."

"'Tis a den of wickedness," commented Busy sententially, "in spite of my Lord Protector, who of a truth doth turn his back on the Saints and hath even allowed the great George Fox and some of the Friends to languish in prison, whilst profligacy holds undisputed sway. Master Courage, meseems those mugs need washing a second time," he added, with sudden irrelevance. "Take them to the kitchen, and do not let me set eyes on thee until they shine like pieces of new silver."

Master Courage would have either resisted the order altogether, or at any rate argued the point of the cleanliness of the mugs, had he dared; but the saintly man possessed on occasions a heavy hand, and he also wore boots which had very hard toes, and the lad realized from the peremptory look in the butler's eyes that this was an occasion when both hand and boot would serve to emphasize Master Busy's orders with unpleasant force if he himself were at all slow to obey.

He tried to catch Charity's eye, but was made aware once more of the eternal truth that women are perverse and fickle creatures, for she would not look at him, and seemed absorbed in the rearrangement of her kerchief.

With a deep sigh which should have spoken volumes to her adamant heart, Courage gathered all the mugs together by their handles, and reluctantly marched out of the room once more.

Hymn-of-Praise Busy waited a moment or two until the clattering of the pewter died away in the distance, then he edged a little closer to the table whereat Mistress Charity seemed still very busy with the fruit, and said haltingly:

"Didst thou really wish to go, mistress . . . to leave thy fond, adoring Hymn-of-Praise . . . to go, mistress? . . . and to break my heart?"

Charity's dainty head—with its tiny velvet cap edged with lawn which hardly concealed sufficiently the wealth of her unruly brown hair—sank meditatively upon her left shoulder.

"Lord, Master Busy," she said demurely, "how was a poor maid to know that you meant it earnestly?"

"Meant it earnestly?"

"Yes . . . a new kirtle . . . a gold ring . . . flowers . . . and sack-posset and pasties to all the guests," she explained. "Is that what you mean . . . hem . . . what *thou*, meanest, Master Busy?"

"Of a surety, mistress . . . and if thou wouldst allow me to . . . to . . ."

"To what, Master Busy?"

"To salute thee," said the saintly man, with a becoming blush, "as the Lord doth allow his creatures to salute one another . . . with a chaste kiss, mistress."

Then as she seemed to demur, he added by way of persuasion:

"I am not altogether a poor man, mistress; and there is that in my coffer upstairs put by, as would please thee in the future."

"Nay! I was not thinking of the money, Master Busy," said this daughter of Eve, coyly, as she held a rosy cheek out in the direction of the righteous man.

'Tis the duty even of a veracious chronicler to draw a discreet veil over certain scenes full of blissful moments for those whom he portrays.

There are no data extant as to what occurred during the next few seconds in the old oak-beamed dining-room of Acol Court in the Island of Thanet. Certain it is that when next we get a peep at Master Hymn-of-Praise Busy and Mistress Charity Haggett, they are standing side by side, he looking somewhat shame-faced in the midst of his obvious joy, and she supremely unconcerned, once more absorbed in the apparently never-ending adornment of the refreshment table.

"Thou'lt have no cause to regret this, mistress," said Busy complacently, "we will be married this very autumn, and I have it in my mind—an it please the Lord—to go up to London and take secret service under my Lord Protector himself."

"Secret service, Master Busy . . . hem . . . I mean Hymn-of-Praise, dear . . . secret service? . . . What may that be?"

"'Tis a noble business, Charity," he replied, "and one highly commended by the Lord: the business of tracking the wicked to their lair, of discovering evil where 'tis hidden in dark places, conspiracies against my Lord Protector, adherence to the cause of the banished tyrants and . . . and . . . so forth."

"Sounds like spying to me," she remarked curtly.

"Spying? . . . Spying, didst thou say?" he exclaimed indignantly. "Fie on thee, Charity, for the thought! Secret service under my Lord Protector 'tis called, and a highly lucrative business too, and one for which I have remarkable aptitude."

"Indeed?"

"Aye! See the manner in which I find things out, mistress. This house now . . . thou wouldst think 'tis but an ordinary house . . . eh?"

His manner changed; the saintliness vanished from his attitude; the expression of his face became sly and knowing. He came nearer to Charity, took hold of her wrist, whilst he raised one finger to his lips.

"Thou wouldst think 'tis an ordinary house . . . wouldst thou not?" he repeated, sinking his voice to a whisper, murmuring right into her ear so that his breath blew her hair about, causing it to tickle her cheek.

She shuddered with apprehension. His manner was so mysterious.

"Yes . . . yes . . ." she murmured, terrified.

"But I tell thee that there's something going on," he added significantly.

"La, Master Busy . . . you . . . you terrify me!" she said, on the verge of tears. "What could there be going on?"

Master Busy raised both his hands and with the right began counting off the fingers of the left.

"Firstly," he began solemnly, "there's an heiress! secondly our master—poor as a church mouse—thirdly a young scholar—secretary, they call him, though he writes no letters, and is all day absorbed in his studies . . . Well, mistress," he concluded, turning a triumphant gaze on her, "tell me, prithee, what happens?"

"What happens, Master Hymn-of-Praise? . . . I do not understand. What does happen?"

"I'll tell thee," he replied sententiously, "when I have found out; but mark my words, mistress, there's something going on in this house . . . Hush! not a word to that young jackanapes," he added as a distant clatter of pewter mugs announced the approach of Master Courage. "Watch with me, mistress, thou'lt perceive something. And when I have found out, 'twill be the beginning of our fortunes."

Once more he placed a warning finger on his lips; once more he gave Mistress Charity a knowing wink, and her wrist an admonitory pressure, then he resumed his staid and severe manner, his saintly mien and somewhat nasal tones, as from the gay outside world beyond the window-embrasure the sound of many voices, the ripple of young laughter, the clink of heeled boots on the stone-flagged path, proclaimed the arrival of the quality.

CHAPTER II

ON A JULY AFTERNOON

In the meanwhile in a remote corner of the park the quality was assembled round the skittle-alley.

Imagine Sir Marmaduke de Chavasse standing there, as stiff a Roundhead as ever upheld my Lord Protector and his Puritanic government in this remote corner of the county of Kent: dour in manner, harsh-featured and hollow-eyed, dressed in dark doublet and breeches wholly void of tags, ribands or buttons. His closely shorn head is flat at the back, square in front, his clean-shaven lips though somewhat thick are always held tightly pressed together. Not far from him sits on a rough wooden seat, Mistress Amelia Editha de Chavasse, widow of Sir Marmaduke's elder brother, a good-looking woman still, save for the look of discontent, almost of suppressed rebellion, apparent in the perpetual dark frown between the straight brows, in the downward curve of the well-chiseled mouth, and in the lowering look which seems to dwell for ever in the handsome dark eyes.

Dame Harrison, too, was there: the large and portly dowager, florid of face, dictatorial in manner, dressed in the supremely unbecoming style prevalent at the moment, when everything that was beautiful in art as well as in nature was condemned as sinful and ungodly; she wore the dark kirtle and plain, ungainly bodice with its hard white kerchief folded over her ample bosom; her hair was parted down the middle and brushed smoothly and flatly to her ears, where but a few curls were allowed to escape with well-regulated primness from beneath the horn-comb, and the whole appearance of her looked almost grotesque, surmounted as it was by the modish high-peaked beaver hat, a marvel of hideousness and discomfort, since the small brim afforded no protection against the sun, and the tall crown was a ready prey to the buffetings of the wind.

Mistress Fairsoul Pyncheon too, was there, the wife of the Squire of Ashe; thin and small, a contrast to Dame Harrison in her mild and somewhat fussy manner; her plain petticoat, too, was embellished with paniers, and in spite of the heat of the day she wore a tippet edged with fur: both of which frivolous adornments had obviously stirred up the wrath of her more Puritanical neighbor.

Then there were the men: busy at this moment with hurling wooden balls along the alley, at the further end of which a hollow-eyed scraggy youth, in shirt and rough linen trousers, was employed in propping up again the fallen nine-pins. Squire John Boatfield had ridden over from Eastry, Sir Timothy Harrison had come in his aunt's coach, and young Squire Pyncheon with his doting mother.

And in the midst of all these sober folk, of young men in severe garments, of portly dames and frowning squires, a girlish figure, young, alert, vigorous, wearing with the charm of her own youth and freshness the unbecoming attire, which disfigured her elders yet seemed to set off her own graceful form, her dainty bosom and pretty arms. Her kirtle, too, was plain, and dull in color, of a soft dovelike gray, without adornment of any kind, but round her shoulders her kerchief was daintily turned, edged with delicate lace, and showing through its filmy folds peeps of her own creamy skin.

'Twas years later that Sir Peter Lely painted Lady Sue when she was a great lady and the friend of the Queen: she was beautiful then, in the full splendor of her maturer charms, but never so beautiful as she was on that hot July afternoon in the year of our Lord 1657, when, heated with the ardor of the game, pleased undoubtedly with the adulation which surrounded her on every side, she laughed and chatted with the men, teased the women, her cheeks aglow, her eyes bright, her brown hair—persistently unruly—flying in thick curls over her neck and shoulders.

"A remarkable talent, good Sir Marmaduke," Dame Harrison was saying to her host, as she cast a complacent eye on her nephew, who had just succeeded in overthrowing three nine-pins at one stroke: "Sir Timothy hath every aptitude for outdoor pursuits, and though my Lord Protector deems all such recreations sinful, yet do I think they tend to the development of muscular energy, which later on may be placed at the service of the Commonwealth."

Sir Timothy Harrison at this juncture had the misfortune of expending his muscular energy in hitting Squire Boatfield violently on the shin with an ill-aimed ball.

"Damn!" ejaculated the latter, heedless of the strict fines imposed by my Lord Protector on unseemly language. "I . . . verily beg the ladies' pardon . . . but . . . this young jackanapes nearly broke my shin-bone."

There certainly had been an exclamation of horror on the part of the ladies at Squire Boatfield's forcible expression of annoyance, Dame Harrison taking no pains to conceal her disapproval.

"Horrid, coarse creature, this neighbor of yours, good Sir Marmaduke," she said with her usual air of decision. "Meseems he is not fit company for your ward."

"Dear Squire Boatfield," sighed Mistress Pyncheon, who was evidently disposed to be more lenient, "how good-humoredly he bears it! Clumsy people should not be trusted in a skittle alley," she added in a mild way, which seemed to be peculiarly exasperating to Dame Harrison's irascible temper.

"I pray you, Sir Timothy," here interposed Lady Sue, trying to repress the laughter which would rise to her lips, "forgive poor Squire John. You scarce can expect him to moderate his language under such provocation."

"Oh! his insults leave me completely indifferent," said the young man with easy unconcern, "his calling me a jackanapes doth not of necessity make me one."

"No!" retorted Squire Boatfield, who was still nursing his shin-bone, "maybe not, Sir Timothy, but it shows how observant I am."

"Oliver, pick up Lady Sue's handkerchief," came in mild accents from Mistress Pyncheon.

"Quite unnecessary, good mistress," rejoined Dame Harrison decisively, "Sir Timothy has already seen it."

And while the two young men made a quick and not altogether successful dive for her ladyship's handkerchief, colliding vigorously with one another in their endeavor to perform this act of gallantry single-handed, Lady Sue gazed down on them, with good-humored contempt, laughter and mischief dancing in her eyes. She knew that she was good to look at, that she was rich, and that she had the pick of the county, aye, of the South of England, did she desire to wed. Perhaps she thought of this, even whilst she laughed at the antics of her bevy of courtiers, all anxious to win her good graces.

Yet even as she laughed, her face suddenly clouded over, a strange, wistful look came into her eyes, and her laughter was lost in a quick, short sigh.

A young man had just crossed the tiny rustic bridge which spanned the ha-ha dividing the flower-garden from the uncultivated park. He walked rapidly through the trees, towards the skittle alley, and as he came nearer, the merry lightheartedness seemed suddenly to vanish from Lady Sue's manner: the ridiculousness of the two young men at her feet, glaring furiously at one another whilst fighting for her handkerchief, seemed now to irritate her; she snatched the bit of delicate linen from their hands, and turned somewhat petulantly away.

"Shall we continue the game?" she said curtly.

The young man, all the while that he approached, had not taken his eyes off Lady Sue. Twice he had stumbled against rough bits of root or branch which he had not perceived in the grass through which he walked. He had seen her laughing gaily, whilst Squire Boatfield used profane language, and smile with contemptuous merriment at the two young men at her feet; he had also seen the change in her manner, the sudden wistful look, the quick sigh, the irritability and the petulance.

But his own grave face expressed neither disapproval at the one mood nor astonishment at the other. He walked somewhat like a somnambulist, with eyes fixed—almost expressionless in the intensity of their gaze.

He was very plainly, even poorly clad, and looked a dark figure even amongst these soberly appareled gentry. The grass beneath his feet had deadened the sound of his footsteps but Sir Marmaduke had apparently perceived him, for he beckoned to him to approach.

"What is it, Lambert?" he asked kindly.

"Your letter to Master Skyffington, Sir Marmaduke," replied the young man, "will you be pleased to sign it?"

"Will it not keep?" said Sir Marmaduke.

"Yes, an you wish it, Sir. I fear I have intruded. I did not know you were busy."

The young man had a harsh voice, and a strange brusqueness of manner which somehow suggested rebellion against the existing conditions of life. He no longer looked at Lady Sue now, but straight at Sir Marmaduke, speaking the brief apology between his teeth, without opening his mouth, as if the words hurt him when they passed his lips.

"You had best speak to Master Skyffington himself about the business," rejoined Sir Marmaduke, not heeding the mumbled apology, "he will be here anon."

He turned abruptly away, and the young man once more left to himself, silently and mechanically moved again in the direction of the house.

"You will join us in a bowl of sack-posset, Master Lambert," said Mistress de Chavasse, striving to be amiable.

"You are very kind," he said none too genially, "in about half-an-hour if you will allow me. There is another letter yet to write."

No one had taken much notice of him. Even in these days when kingship and House of Lords were abolished, the sense of social inequality remained keen. To this coterie of avowed Republicans, young Richard Lambert—secretary or what-not to Sir Marmaduke, a paid dependent at any rate—was not worth more than a curt nod of the head, a condescending acknowledgment of his existence at best.

But Lady Sue had not even bestowed the nod. She had not actually taken notice of his presence when he came; the wistful look had vanished as soon as the young man's harsh voice had broken on her ear: she did not look on him now that he went.

She was busy with her game. Nathless her guardian's secretary was of no more importance in the rich heiress's sight than that mute row of nine-pins at the end of the alley, nor was there, mayhap, in her mind much social distinction between the hollow-eyed lad who set them up stolidly from time to time, and the silent young student who wrote those letters which Sir Marmaduke had not known how to spell.

CHAPTER III

THE EXILE

But despite outward indifference, with the brief appearance of the soberly-garbed young student upon the scene and his abrupt and silent departure, all the zest seemed to have gone out of Lady Sue's mood.

The ingenuous flatteries of her little court irritated her now: she no longer felt either amused or pleased by the extravagant compliments lavished upon her beauty and skill by portly Squire John, by Sir Timothy Harrison or the more diffident young Squire Pyncheon.

"Of a truth, I sometimes wish, Lady Sue, that I could find out if you have any faults," remarked Squire Boatfield unctuously.

"Nay, Squire," she retorted sharply, "pray try to praise me to my female friends."

In vain did Mistress Pyncheon admonish her son to be more bold in his wooing.

"You behave like a fool, Oliver," she said meekly.

"But, Mother . . ."

"Go, make yourself pleasing to her ladyship."

"But, Mother . . ."

"I pray you, my son," she retorted with unusual acerbity, "do you want a million or do you not?"

"But, Mother . . ."

"Then go at once and get it, ere that fool Sir Timothy or the odious Boatfield capture it under your very nose."

"But, Mother . . ."

"Go! say something smart to her at once . . . talk about your gray mare . . . she is over fond of horses . . ."

Then as the young Squire, awkward and clumsy in his manner, more accustomed to the company of his own servants than to that of highborn ladies, made sundry unfortunate attempts to enchain the attention of the heiress, his worthy mother turned with meek benignity to Sir Marmaduke.

"A veritable infatuation, good Sir Marmaduke," she said with a sigh, "quite against my interests, you know. I had no thought to see the dear lad married so soon, nor to give up my home at the Dene yet, in favor of a new mistress. Not but that Oliver is not a good son to his mother—such a good lad!—and such a good husband he would be to any girl who . . ."

"A strange youth that secretary of yours, Sir Marmaduke," here interposed Dame Harrison in her loud, dictatorial voice, breaking in on Mistress Pyncheon's dithyrambs, "modest he appears to be, and silent too: a paragon meseems!"

She spoke with obvious sarcasm, casting covert glances at Lady Sue to see if she heard.

Sir Marmaduke shrugged his shoulders.

"Lambert is very industrious," he said curtly.

"I thought secretaries never did anything but suck the ends of their pens," suggested Mistress Pyncheon mildly.

"Sometimes they make love to their employer's daughter," retorted Dame Harrison spitefully, for Lady Sue was undoubtedly lending an ear to the conversation now that it had the young secretary for object. She was not watching Squire Boatfield who was wielding the balls just then with remarkable prowess, and at this last remark from the portly old dame, she turned sharply round and said with a strange little air of haughtiness which somehow became her very well:

"But then you see, mistress, Master Lambert's employer doth not possess a daughter of his own—only a ward . . . mayhap that is the reason why his secretary performs his duties so well in other ways."

Her cheeks were glowing as she said this, and she looked quite defiant, as if challenging these disagreeable mothers and aunts of fortune-hunting youths to cast unpleasant aspersions on a friend whom she had taken under her special protection.

Sir Marmaduke looked at her keenly; a deep frown settled between his eyes at sight of her enthusiasm. His face suddenly looked older, and seemed more dour, more repellent than before.

"Sue hath such a romantic temperament," he said dryly, speaking between his teeth and as if with an effort. "Lambert's humble origin has fired her imagination. He has no parents and his elder brother is the blacksmith down at Acol; his aunt, who seems to have had charge of the boys ever since they were children, is just a common old woman who lives in the village—a strict adherent, so I am told, of this new sect, whom Justice Bennet of Derby hath so justly nicknamed 'Quakers.' They talk strangely, these people, and believe in a mighty queer fashion. I know not if Lambert be of their creed, for he does not use the 'thee' and 'thou' when speaking as do all Quakers, so I am told; but his empty pockets, a smattering of learning which he has picked up the Lord knows where, and a plethora of unspoken grievances, have all proved a sure passport to Lady Sue's sympathy."

"Nay, but your village of Acol seems full of queer folk, good Sir Marmaduke," said Mistress Pyncheon. "I have heard talk among my servants of a mysterious prince hailed from France, who has lately made one of your cottages his home."

"Oh! ah! yes!" quoth Sir Marmaduke lightly, "the interesting exile from the Court of King Louis. I did not know that his fame had reached you, mistress."

"A French prince?—in this village?" exclaimed Dame Harrison sharply, "and pray, good Sir Marmaduke, where did you go a-fishing to get such a bite?"

"Nay!" replied Sir Marmaduke with a short laugh, "I had naught to do with his coming; he wandered to Acol from Dover about six months ago it seems, and found refuge in the Lamberts' cottage, where he has remained ever since. A queer fellow I believe. I have only seen him once or twice in my fields . . . in the evening, usually . . ."

Perhaps there was just a curious note of irritability in Sir Marmaduke's voice as he spoke of this mysterious inhabitant of the quiet village of Acol; certain it is that the two matchmaking old dames seemed smitten at one and the same time with a sense of grave danger to their schemes.

An exile from France, a prince who hides his identity and his person in a remote Kentish village, and a girl with a highly imaginative temperament like Lady Sue! here was surely a more definite, a more important rival to the pretensions of homely country youths like Sir Timothy Harrison or Squire Pyncheon, than even the student of humble origin whose brother was a blacksmith, whose aunt was a Quakeress, and who wandered about the park of Acol with hollow eyes fixed longingly on the much-courted heiress.

Dame Harrison and Mistress Pyncheon both instinctively turned a scrutinizing gaze on her ladyship. Neither of them was perhaps ordinarily very observant, but self-interest had made them keen, and it would have been impossible not to note the strange atmosphere which seemed suddenly to pervade the entire personality of the young girl.

There was nothing in her face now expressive of whole-hearted partisanship for an absent friend, such as she had displayed when she felt that young Lambert was being unjustly sneered at; rather was it a kind of entranced and arrested thought, as if her mind, having come in contact with one all-absorbing idea, had ceased to function in any other direction save that one.

Her cheeks no longer glowed, they seemed pale and transparent like those of an ascetic; her lips were slightly parted, her eyes appeared unconscious of everything round her, and gazing at something enchanting beyond that bank of clouds which glimmered, snow-white, through the trees.

"But what in the name of common sense is a French prince doing in Acol village?" ejaculated Dame Harrison in her most strident voice, which had the effect of drawing every one's attention to herself and to Sir Marmaduke, whom she was thus addressing.

The men ceased playing and gathered nearer. The spell was broken. That strange and mysterious look vanished from Lady Sue's face; she turned away from the speakers and idly plucked a few bunches of acorn from an overhanging oak.

"Of a truth," replied Sir Marmaduke, whose eyes were still steadily fixed on his ward, "I know as little about the fellow, ma'am, as you do yourself. He was exiled from France by King Louis for political reasons, so he explained to the old woman Lambert, with whom he is still lodging. I understand that he hardly ever sleeps at the cottage, that his appearances there are short and fitful and that his ways are passing mysterious. . . . And that is all I know," he added in conclusion, with a careless shrug of the shoulders.

"Quite a romance!" remarked Mistress Pyncheon dryly.

"You should speak to him, good Sir Marmaduke," said Dame Harrison decisively, "you are a magistrate. 'Tis your duty to know more of this fellow and his antecedents."

"Scarcely that, ma'am," rejoined Sir Marmaduke, "you understand . . . I have a young ward living for the nonce in my house . . . she is very rich, and, I fear me, of a very romantic disposition . . . I shall try to get the man removed from hence, but until that is accomplished, I prefer to know nothing about him . . ."

"How wise of you, good Sir Marmaduke!" quoth Mistress Pyncheon with a sigh of content.

A sentiment obviously echoed in the hearts of a good many people there present.

"One knows these foreign adventurers," concluded Sir Marmaduke with pleasant irony, "with their princely crowns and forlorn causes . . . half a million of English money would no doubt regild the former and bolster up the latter."

He rose from his seat as he spoke, boldly encountering even as he did so, a pair of wrathful and contemptuous girlish eyes fixed steadily upon him.

"Shall we go within?" he said, addressing his guests, and returning his young ward's gaze haughtily, even commandingly; "a cup of sack-posset will be welcome after the fatigue of the game. Will you honor my poor house, mistress? and you, too, ma'am? Gentlemen, you must fight among yourselves for the privilege of escorting Lady Sue to the house, and if she prove somewhat disdainful this beautiful summer's afternoon, I pray you remember that faint heart never won fair lady, and that the citadel is not worth storming an it is not obdurate."

The suggestion of sack-posset proved vastly to the liking of the merry company. Mistress de Chavasse who had been singularly silent all the afternoon, walked quickly in advance of her brother-in-law's guests, no doubt in order to cast a scrutinizing eye over the arrangements of the table, which she had entrusted to the servants.

Sir Marmaduke followed at a short distance, escorting the older women, making somewhat obvious efforts to control his own irritability, and to impart some sort of geniality to the proceedings.

Then in a noisy group in the rear came the three men still fighting for the good graces of Lady Sue, whilst she, silent, absorbed, walked leisurely along, paying no heed to the wrangling of her courtiers, her fingers tearing up with nervous impatience the delicate cups of the acorns, which she then threw from her with childish petulance.

And her eyes still sought the distance beyond the boundaries of Sir Marmaduke's private grounds, there where cornfields and sky and sea were merged by the summer haze into a glowing line of emerald and purple and gold.

CHAPTER IV

GRINDING POVERTY

It was about an hour later. Sir Marmaduke's guests had departed, Dame Harrison in her rickety coach, Mistress Pyncheon in her chaise, whilst Squire Boatfield was riding his well-known ancient cob.

Everyone had drunk sack-posset, had eaten turkey pasties, and enjoyed the luscious fruit: the men had striven to be agreeable to the heiress, the old ladies to be encouraging to their protégés. Sir Marmaduke had tried to be equally amiable to all, whilst favoring none. He was an unpopular man in East Kent and he knew it, doing nothing to counterbalance the unpleasing impression caused invariably by his surly manner, and his sarcastic, often violent, temper.

Mistress Amelia Editha de Chavassee was now alone with her brother-in-law in the great bare hall of the Court, Lady Sue having retired to her room under pretext of the vapors, and young Lambert been finally dismissed from work for the day.

"You are passing kind to the youth, Marmaduke," said Mistress de Chavassee meditatively when the young man's darkly-clad figure had disappeared up the stairs.

She was sitting in a high-backed chair, her head resting against the carved woodwork. The folds of her simple gown hung primly round her well-shaped figure. Undoubtedly she was still a very good-looking woman, though past the hey-day of her youth and beauty. The half-light caused by the depth of the window embrasure, and the smallness of the glass panes through which the summer sun hardly succeeded in gaining admittance, added a certain softness to her chiseled features, and to the usually hard expression of her large dark eyes.

She was gazing out of the tall window, wherein the several broken panes were roughly patched with scraps of paper, out into the garden and the distance beyond, where the sea could be always guessed at, even when not seen. Sir Marmaduke had his back to the light: he was sitting astride a low chair, his high-booted foot tapping the ground impatiently, his fingers drumming a devil's tattoo against the back of the chair.

"Lambert would starve if I did not provide for him," he said with a sneer. "Adam, his brother, could do naught for him: he is poor as a church-mouse, poorer even than I—but nathless," he added with a violent oath, "it strikes everyone as madness that I should keep a secretary when I scarce can pay the wages of a serving maid."

"'Twere better you paid your servants' wages, Marmaduke," she retorted harshly, "they were insolent to me just now. Why do you not pay the girl's arrears to-day?"

"Why do I not climb up to the moon, my dear Editha, and bring down a few stars with me in my descent," he replied with a shrug of his broad shoulders. "I have come to my last shilling."

"The Earl of Northallerton cannot live for ever."

"He hath vowed, I believe, that he would do it, if only to spite me. And by the time that he come to die this accursed Commonwealth will have abolished all titles and confiscated every estate."

"Hush, Marmaduke," she said, casting a quick, furtive look all round her, "there may be spies about."

"Nay, I care not," he rejoined roughly, jumping to his feet and kicking the chair aside so that it struck with a loud crash against the flagged floor. "'Tis but little good a man gets for cleaving loyally to the Commonwealth. The sequestered estates of the Royalists would have been distributed among the adherents of republicanism, and not held to bolster up a military dictatorship. Bah!" he continued, allowing his temper to overmaster him, speaking in harsh tones and with many a violent oath, "it had been wiser to embrace the Royal cause. The Lord Protector is sick, so 'tis said. His son Richard hath no backbone, and the present tyranny is worse than the last. I cannot collect my rents; I have been given neither reward nor compensation for the help I gave in '46. So much for their boasted gratitude

and their many promises! My Lord Protector feasts the Dutch ambassadors with music and with wine, my Lords Ireton and Fairfax and Hutchinson and the accursed lot of canting Puritans flaunt it in silks and satins, whilst I go about in a ragged doublet and with holes in my shoes."

"There's Lady Sue," murmured Mistress de Chavasse soothingly.

"Pshaw! the guardianship of a girl who comes of age in three months!"

"You can get another by that time."

"Not I. I am not a sycophant hanging round White Hall! 'Twas sheer good luck and no merit of mine that got me the guardianship of Sue. Lord Middlesborough, her kinsman, wanted it; the Courts would have given her to him, but old Noll thought him too much of a 'gentleman,' whilst I—an out-at-elbows country squire, was more to my Lord Protector's liking. 'Tis the only thing he ever did for me."

There was intense bitterness and a harsh vein of sarcasm running through Sir Marmaduke's talk. It was the speech of a disappointed man, who had hoped, and striven, and fought once; had raised longing hands towards brilliant things and sighed after glory, or riches, or fame, but whose restless spirit had since been tamed, crushed under the heavy weight of unsatisfied ambition.

Poverty—grinding, unceasing, uninteresting poverty, had been Sir Marmaduke's relentless tormentor ever since he had reached man's estate. His father, Sir Jeremy de Chavasse, had been poor before him. The younger son of that Earl of Northallerton who cut such a brilliant figure at the Court of Queen Elizabeth, Jeremy had married Mistress Spanton of Acol Court, who had brought him a few acres of land heavily burdened with mortgage as her dowry. They were a simple-minded, unostentatious couple who pinched and scraped and starved that their two sons might keep up the appearances of gentlemen at the Court of King Charles.

But both the young men seemed to have inherited from their brilliant grandfather luxurious tastes and a love of gambling and of show—but neither his wealth nor yet his personal charm of manner. The eldest, Rowland, however, soon disappeared from the arena of life. He married when scarce twenty years of age a girl who had been a play-actress. This marriage nearly broke his doting mother's heart, and his own, too, for the matter of that, for the union was a most unhappy one. Rowland de Chavasse died very soon after, unreconciled to his father and mother, who refused to see him or his family, even on his deathbed.

Jeremy de Chavasse's few hopes now centered on his younger son, Marmaduke. In order to enable the young man to remain in London, to mix freely and to hold his own in that set into which family traditions had originally gained him admittance, the fond mother and indulgent father denied themselves the very necessities of life.

Marmaduke took everything that was given him, whilst chafing at the paucity of his allowance. Determined to cut a figure at Court, he spent two years and most of his mother's dowry in a vain attempt to capture the heart of one or the other of the rich heiresses who graced the entourage of Charles I.

But Nature who had given Marmaduke boundless ambition, had failed to bestow on him those attributes which would have helped him on towards its satisfaction. He was neither sufficiently prepossessing to please an heiress, nor sufficiently witty and brilliant to catch the royal eye or the favor of his uncle, the present Earl of Northallerton. His efforts in the direction of advantageous matrimony had earned for him at Court the nickname of "The Sparrowhawk." But even these efforts had soon to be relinquished for want of the wherewithal.

The doting mother no longer could supply him with a sufficiency of money to vie with the rich gallants at the Court, and the savings which Sir Jeremy had been patiently accumulating with a view to freeing the Acol estates from mortgage went instead to rescue young Marmaduke from a debtor's prison.

Poor Sir Jeremy did not long survive his disappointment. Marmaduke returned to Acol Court only to find his mother a broken invalid, and his father dead.

Since then it had been a perpetual struggle against poverty and debt, a bitter revolt against Fate, a burning desire to satisfy ambition which had received so serious a check.

When the great conflict broke out between King and Parliament, he threw himself into it, without zest and without conviction, embracing the cause of the malcontents with a total lack of enthusiasm, merely out of disappointment—out of hatred for the brilliant Court and circle in which he had once hoped to become a prominent figure.

He fought under Ireton, was commended as a fairly good soldier, though too rebellious to be very reliable, too self-willed to be wholly trusted.

Even in these days of brilliant reputations quickly made, he remained obscure and practically unnoticed. Advancement never came his way and whilst younger men succeeded in attracting the observant eye of old Noll, he was superseded at every turn, passed over—anon forgotten.

When my Lord Protector's entourage was formed, the Household organized, no one thought of the Sparrowhawk for any post that would have satisfied his desires. Once more he cursed his own poverty. Money—the want of it—he felt was at the root of all his disappointments. A burning desire to obtain it at any cost, even that of honor, filled his entire being, his mind, his soul, his thoughts, every nerve in his body. Money, and social prestige! To be somebody at Court or elsewhere, politically, commercially,—he cared not. To handle money and to command attention!

He became wary, less reckless, striving to obtain by diplomatic means that which he had once hoped to snatch by sheer force of personality. The Court of Chancery having instituted itself sole guardian and administrator of the revenues and fortunes of minors whose fathers had fought on the Royalist side, and were either dead or in exile, and arrogating unto itself the power to place such minors under the tutelage of persons whose loyalty to the Commonwealth was undoubted, Sir Marmaduke bethought himself of applying for one of these official guardianships which were known to be very lucrative and moreover, practically sinecures.

Fate for once favored him; a half-contemptuous desire to do something for this out-at-elbows Kentish squire who had certainly been a loyal adherent of the Commonwealth, caused my Lord Protector to favor his application. The rich daughter of the Marquis of Dover was placed under the guardianship of Sir Marmaduke de Chavasse with an allowance of £4,000 a year for her maintenance, until she came of age. A handsome fortune and stroke of good luck for a wise and prudent man:—a drop in an ocean of debts, difficulties and expensive tastes, in the case of Sir Marmaduke.

A prolonged visit to London with a view either of gaining a foothold in the new Court, or of drawing the attention of the malcontents, of Monk and his party, or even of the Royalists, to himself, resulted in further debts, in more mortgages, more bitter disappointments.

The man himself did not please. His personality was unsympathetic; Lady Sue's money which he now lavished right and left, bought neither friendship nor confidence. He joined all the secret clubs which in defiance of Cromwell's rigid laws against betting and gambling, were the resort of all the smart gentlemen in the town. Ill-luck at hazard and dice pursued him: he was a bad loser, quarrelsome and surly. His ambition had not taught him the salutary lesson of how to make friends in order to attain his desires.

His second return to the ancestral home was scarcely less disastrous than the first; a mortgage on his revenues as guardian of Lady Sue Aldmarshe just saved him this time from the pursuit of his creditors, and this mortgage he had only obtained through false statements as to his ward's age.

As he told his sister-in-law a moment ago, he was at his last gasp. He had perhaps just begun to realize that he would never succeed through the force of his own individuality. Therefore, money had become a still more imperative necessity to him. He was past forty now. Disappointed ambition and an ever rebellious spirit had left severe imprints on his face: his figure was growing heavy, his prominent lips, unadorned by a mustache, had an unpleasant downward droop, and lately he had even noticed that the hair on the top of his head was not so thick as of yore.

The situation was indeed getting desperate, since Lady Sue would be of age in three months, when all revenues for her maintenance would cease.

"Methinks her million will go to one of those young jackanapes who hang about her," sighed Mistress de Chavasse, with almost as much bitterness as Sir Marmaduke had shown.

Her fortunes were in a sense bound up with those of her brother-in-law. He had been most unaccountably kind to her of late, a kindness which his many detractors attributed either to an infatuation for his brother's widow, or to a desire to further irritate his uncle the Earl of Northallerton, who—a rigid Puritan himself—hated the play-actress and her connection with his own family.

"Can naught be done, Marmaduke?" she asked after a slight pause, during which she had watched anxiously the restless figure of her brother-in-law as he paced up and down the narrow hall.

"Can you suggest anything, my dear Editha?" he retorted roughly.

"Pshaw!" she ejaculated with some impatience, "you are not so old, but you could have made yourself agreeable to the wench."

"You think that she would have fallen in love with her middle-aged guardian?" he exclaimed with a harsh, sarcastic laugh. "That girl? . . . with her head full of romantic nonsense . . . and I . . . in ragged doublet, with a bald head, and an evil temper . . . Bah!!! . . . But," he added, with an unpleasant sneer, "'tis unselfish and disinterested on your part, my dear Editha, even to suggest it. Sue does not like you. Her being mistress here would not be conducive to your comfort."

"Nay! 'tis no use going on in this manner any longer, Marmaduke," she said dejectedly. "Pleasant times will not come my way so long as you have not a shilling to give me for a new gown, and cannot afford to keep up my house in London."

She fully expected another retort from him—brutal and unbridled as was his wont when money affairs were being discussed. He was not accustomed to curb his violence in her presence. She had been his helpmeet in many unavowable extravagances, in the days when he was still striving after a brilliant position in town. There had been certain rumors anent a gambling den, whereat Mistress de Chavasse had been the presiding spirit and which had come under the watchful eye of my Lord Protector's spies.

Now she had perforce to share her brother-in-law's poverty. At any rate he provided a roof over her head. On the advent of Lady Sue Aldmarshe into his bachelor establishment he called on his sister-in-law for the part of duenna.

At one time the fair Editha had exercised her undoubted charms over Marmaduke's violent nature, but latterly she had become a mere butt for his outbursts of rage. But now to her astonishment, and in response to her petulant reproach, his fury seemed to fall away from him. He threw his head back and broke out into uncontrolled, half-sarcastic, almost defiant laughter.

"How blind you are, my dear Editha," he said with a shrug of his broad shoulders. "Nay! an I mistake not, in that case there will be some strange surprises for you within the next three months. I pray you try and curb your impatience until then, and to bear with the insolence of a serving wench, 'Twill serve you well, mine oath on that!" he added significantly.

Then without vouchsafing further explanations of his enigmatic utterances, he turned on his heel—still laughing apparently at some pleasing thought—and walked upstairs, leaving her to meditate.

CHAPTER V

THE LEGAL ASPECT

Mistress de Chavasse sat musing, in that high-backed chair, for some considerable time. Anon Sir Marmaduke once more traversed the hall, taking no heed of her as he went out into the garden. She watched his broad figure moving along the path and then crossing the rustic bridge until it disappeared among the trees of the park.

There was something about his attitude of awhile ago which puzzled her. And with puzzlement came an inexplicable fear: she had known Marmaduke in all his moods, but never in such an one as he had displayed before her just now. There had been a note almost of triumph in the laughter with which he had greeted her last reproach. The cry of the sparrowhawk when it seizes its prey.

Triumph in Sir Marmaduke filled her with dread. No one knew better than she did the hopeless condition of his financial status. Debt—prison perhaps—was waiting for him at every turn. Yet he seemed triumphant! She knew him to have reached those confines of irritability and rebellion against poverty which would cause him to shrink from nothing for the sake of gaining money. Yet he seemed triumphant!

Instinctively she shuddered as she thought of Sue. She had no cause to like the girl, yet would she not wish to see her come to harm.

She did not dare avow even to herself the conviction which she had, that if Sir Marmaduke could gain anything by the young girl's death, he would not hesitate to . . . Nay! she would not even frame that thought. Marmaduke had been kind to her; she could but hope that temptation such as that, would never come his way.

Hymn-of-Praise Busy broke in on her meditations. His nasal tones—which had a singular knack of irritating her as a rule—struck quite pleasingly on her ear, as a welcome interruption to the conflict of her thoughts.

"Master Skyffington, ma'am," he said in his usual drawly voice, "he is on his way to Dover, and desired his respects, an you wish to see him."

"Yes! yes! I'll see Master Skyffington," she said with alacrity, rising from her chair, "go apprise Sir Marmaduke, and ask Master Skyffington to come within."

She was all agitation now, eager, excited, and herself went forward to meet the quaint, little wizened figure which appeared in the doorway.

Master Skyffington, attorney-at-law, was small and thin—looked doubly so, in fact, in the black clothes which he wore. His eyes were blue and watery, his manner peculiarly diffident. He seemed to present a perpetual apology to the world for his own existence therein.

Even now as Mistress de Chavasse seemed really overjoyed to see him, he backed his meager person out of the doorway as she approached, whereupon she—impatiently—clutched his arm and dragged him forward into the hall.

"Sit down there, master," she said, speaking with obvious agitation, and almost pushing the poor little man off his feet whilst dragging him to a chair. "Sir Marmaduke will see you anon, but 'twas a kind thought to come and bring me news."

"Hem! . . . hem! . . ." stammered Master Skyffington, "I . . . that is . . . hem . . . I left Canterbury this morning and was on my way to Dover . . . hem . . . this lies on my way, ma'am . . . and . . ."

"Yes! yes!" she said impatiently, "but you have some news, of course?"

"News! . . . news!" he muttered apologetically, and clutching at his collar, which seemed to be choking him, "what news—er—I pray you, ma'am?"

"That clew?" she insisted.

"It was very slight," he stammered.

"And it led to naught?"

"Alas!"

Her eagerness vanished. She sank back into her chair and moaned.

"My last hope!" she said dully.

"Nay! nay!" rejoined Master Skyffington quite cheerfully, his courage seemingly having risen with her despair. "We must not be despondent. The noble Earl of Northallerton hath interested himself of late in the search and . . ."

But she shrugged her shoulders, whilst a short, bitter laugh escaped her lips:

"At last?" she said with biting sarcasm. "After twelve years!"

"Nay! but remember, ma'am, that his lordship now is very ill . . . and nigh on seventy years old. . . . Failing your late husband, Master Rowland—whom the Lord hath in His keeping—your eldest son is . . . hem . . . that is . . . by law, ma'am, . . . and with all respect due to Sir Marmaduke . . . your eldest son is heir to the Earldom."

"And though his lordship hates me, he still prefers that my son should succeed to his title, rather than Sir Marmaduke whom he abhors."

But that suggestion was altogether too much for poor Master Skyffington's sense of what was due to so noble a family, and to its exalted head.

"That is . . . er . . ." he muttered in supreme discomfort, swallowing great gulps which rose to his throat at this rash and disrespectful speech from the ex-actress. "Family feuds . . . hem . . . er . . . very distressing of a truth . . . and . . . that is . . ."

"I fear me his lordship will be disappointed," she rejoined, quite heedless of the little attorney's perturbation, "and that under these circumstances Sir Marmaduke will surely succeed."

"I was about to remark," he rejoined, "that now, with my lord's help—his wealth and influence . . . now, that is, . . . that he has interested himself in the matter . . . hem . . . we might make fresh inquiries . . . that is . . . er . . ."

"It will be useless, master. I have done all that is humanly possible. I loved my boys dearly—and it was because of my love for them that I placed them under my mother's care. . . . I loved them, you understand, but I was living in a gay world in London . . . my husband was dead . . . I could do naught for their comfort. . . . I thought it would be best for them . . ."

It was her turn now to speak humbly, almost apologetically, whilst her eyes sought those of the simple little attorney, trying to read approval in his glance, or at any rate an absence of reproof. He was shaking his head, sighing with visible embarrassment the while. In his innermost soul, he could find no excuse for the frivolous mother, anxious to avoid the responsibilities which the Lord Himself had put upon her: anxious to be rid of her children in order that she might pursue with greater freedom and ease that life of enjoyment and thoughtlessness which she craved.

"My mother was a strange woman," continued Mistress de Chavassee earnestly and placing her small white hand on the black sleeve of the attorney, "she cared little enough for me, and not at all for London and for society. She did not understand the many duties that devolve on a woman of fashion. . . . And I was that in those days! . . . twenty years ago!"

"Ah! Truly! truly!" sighed Master Skyffington.

"Mayhap she acted according to her own lights. . . . After some years she became a convert to that strange new faith . . . of the people who call themselves 'Friends' . . . who salute no one with the hat, and who talk so strangely, saying: 'thee' and 'thou' even when addressing their betters. One George Fox had a great hold on her. He was quite a youth then, but she thought him a saint. 'Tis he, methinks, poisoned her mind against me, and caused her to curse me on her deathbed."

She gave a little shudder—of superstition, perhaps. The maternal curse—she felt—was mayhap bearing fruit after all. Master Skyffington's watery eyes expressed gentle sympathy. His calling had taught him many of the hidden secrets of human nature and of Life: he guessed that the time—if not already here—was nigh at hand, when this unfortunate woman would realize the emptiness of her life, and would begin to reap the bitter harvest of the barren seeds which she had sown.

"Aye! I lay it all at the door of these 'Friends' who turned a mother's heart against her own daughter," continued Mistress de Chavasse vehemently. "She never told me that she was sick, sent me neither letter nor message; only after her death a curt note came to me, writ in her hand, entrusted to one of her own co-worshippers, a canting, mouthing creature, who grinned whilst I read the heartless message. My mother had sent her grandchildren away, so she told me in the letter, when she felt that the Lord was calling her to Him. She had placed my boys—my boys, master!—in the care of a trusted 'friend' who would bring them up in the fear of God, away from the influence of their mother. My boys, master, remember! . . . they were to be brought up in ignorance of their name—of the very existence of their mother. The 'friend,' doubtless a fellow Quaker—had agreed to this on my mother's deathbed."

"Hm! 'tis passing strange, and passing sad," said the attorney, with real sympathy now, for there was a pathetic note of acute sorrow in Mistress de Chavasse's voice, "but at the time . . . hem . . . and with money and influence . . . hem . . . much might have been done."

"Ah! believe me, master, I did what I could. I was in London then. . . . I flew to Canterbury where my mother lived. . . . I found her dead . . . and the boys gone . . . none of the neighbors could tell me whither. . . . All they knew was that a woman had been living with my mother of late and had gone away, taking the boys with her. . . . My boys, master, and no one could tell me whither they had gone! I spent what money I had, and Sir Marmaduke nobly bore his share in the cost of a ceaseless search, as the Earl of Northallerton would do nothing then to help me."

"Passing strange . . . passing sad," murmured Master Skyffington, shaking his head, "but methinks I recollect . . . hem . . . some six years ago . . . a quest which led to a clew . . . er . . . that is . . . two young gentlemen . . ."

"Impostors, master," she rejoined, "aye! I have heard of many such since then. At first I used to believe their stories . . ."

"At first?" he ejaculated in amazement, "but surely . . . hem . . . the faces . . . your own sons, ma'am . . ."

"Ah! the faces!" she said, whilst a blush of embarrassment, even of shame, now suffused her pale cheeks. "I mean . . . you understand . . . I . . . I had not seen my boys since they were babes in arms . . . they were ten years old when they were taken away . . . but . . . but it is nigh on twenty-two years since I have set eyes on their faces. I would not know them, if they passed me by."

Tears choked her voice. Shame had added its bitter sting to the agony of her sorrow. Of a truth it was a terrible epilogue of misery, following on a life-story of frivolity and of heartlessness which Mistress de Chavasse had almost unconsciously related to the poor ignorant country attorney. Desirous at all costs of retaining her freedom, she had parted from her children with a light heart, glad enough that their grandmother was willing to relieve her of all responsibility. Time slipped by whilst she enjoyed herself, danced and flirted, gambled and played her part in that world of sport and Fashion wherein a mother's heart was an unnecessary commodity. Ten years are a long while in the life of an old woman who lives in a remote country town, and sees Death approaching with slow yet certain stride; but that same decade is but as a fleeting hour to the woman who is young and who lives for the moment.

The boys had been forgotten long ere they disappeared! Forgotten? perhaps not!—but their memory put away in a hidden cell of the mind where other inconvenient thoughts were stored: only to be released and gazed upon when other more agreeable ones had ceased to fill the brain.

She felt humbled before this simple-minded man, whom she knew she had shocked by the recital of her callousness. With innate gentleness of disposition he tried to hide his feelings and to set aside the subject for the moment.

"Sir Marmaduke was very disinterested, when he aided you in the quest," he said meekly, glad to be able to praise one whom he felt it his duty to respect, "for under present circumstances . . . hem! . . ."

"I will raise no difficulties in Sir Marmaduke's way," she rejoined, "there is no doubt in my mind that my boys are dead, else I had had news of them ere this."

He looked at her keenly—as keenly as he dared with his mild, blue eyes. It was hard to keep in sympathy with her. Her moods seemed to change as she spoke of her boys and then of Sir Marmaduke. Her last remark seemed to argue that her callousness with regard to her sons had not entirely yielded to softer emotions yet.

"In case of my Lord Northallerton's death," she continued lightly, "I shall not put in a claim on behalf of any son of mine."

"Whereupon—hem Sir Marmaduke as next-of-kin, would have the enjoyment of the revenues—and mayhap would have influence enough then to make good his claim to the title before the House of Lords . . ."

He checked himself: looked furtively round and added:

"Provided it please God and my Lord Protector that the House of Lords come back to Westminster by that time."

"I thank you, master," said Mistress de Chavasse, rising from her chair, intimating that this interview was now over, "you have told me all that I wish to know. Let me assure you, that I will not prove ungrateful. Your services will be amply repaid by whomever succeeds to the title and revenues of Northallerton. Did you wish to see Sir Marmaduke?"

"I thank you, mistress, not to-day," replied Master Skyffington somewhat dryly. The lady's promises had not roused his enthusiasm. He would have preferred to see more definite reward for his labors, for he had worked faithfully and was substantially out of pocket in this quest after the two missing young men.

But he was imbued with that deep respect for the family he had served all his life, which no conflict between privilege and people would ever eradicate, and though Mistress de Chavasse's origin was of the humblest, she was nevertheless herself now within the magic circle into which Master Skyffington never gazed save with the deepest reverence.

He thought it quite natural that she should dismiss him with a curt and condescending nod, and when she had swept majestically out of the room, he made his way humbly across the hall, then by the garden door out towards the tumble-down barn where he had tethered his old mare.

Master Courage helped him to mount, and he rode away in the direction of the Dover Road, his head bent, his thoughts dwelling in puzzlement and wonder on the strange doings of those whom he still reverently called his betters.

CHAPTER VI

UNDER THE SHADOW OF THE ELMS

Her head full of romantic nonsense! Well! perhaps that was the true keynote of Sue's character; perhaps, too, it was that same romantic temperament which gave such peculiar charm to her personality. It was not mere beauty—of which she had a plentiful share—nor yet altogether her wealth which attracted so many courtiers to her feet. Men who knew her in those days at Acol and subsequently at Court said that Lady Sue was magnetic.

She compelled attention, she commanded admiration, through that very romanticism of hers which caused her eyes to glow at the recital of valor, or sorrow, or talent, which caused her to see beauty of thought and mind and character there where it lay most deeply hidden, there—sometimes—where it scarce existed.

The dark figure of her guardian's secretary had attracted her attention from the moment when she first saw him moving silently about the house and park: the first words she spoke to him were words of sympathy. His life-story—brief and simple as it had been—had interested her. He seemed so different from these young and old country squires who frequented Acol Court. He neither wooed nor flattered her, yet seemed to find great joy in her company. His voice at times was harsh, his manner abrupt and even rebellious, but at others it fell to infinite gentleness when he talked to her of Nature and the stars, both of which he had studied deeply.

He never spoke of religion. That subject which was on everybody's tongue, together with the free use of the most sacred names, he rigorously avoided, also politics, and my Lord Protector's government, his dictatorship and ever-growing tyranny: but he knew the name of every flower that grew in meadow or woodland, the note of every bird as it trilled its song.

There is no doubt that but for the advent of that mysterious personality into Acol village, the deep friendship which had grown in Sue's heart for Richard Lambert would have warmed into a more passionate attachment.

But she was too young to reflect, too impulsive to analyze her feelings. The mystery which surrounded the foreigner who lodged at the Quakeress's cottage had made strong appeal to her idealism.

His first introduction to her notice, in the woods beyond the park gate on that cold January evening, with the moon gleaming weirdly through the branches of the elms, his solitary figure leaning against a tree, had fired her imagination and set it wildly galloping after mad fantasies.

He had scarcely spoken on that first occasion, but his silence was strangely impressive. She made up her mind that he was singularly handsome, although she could not judge of that very clearly for he wore a heavy mustache, and a shade over one eye; but he was tall, above the average, and carried the elaborate habiliments which the Cavaliers still affected, with consummate grace and ease. She thought, too, that the thick perruque became him very well, and his muffled voice, when he spoke, sounded singularly sweet.

Since then she had seen him constantly. At rare intervals at first, for maidenly dignity forbade that she should seem eager to meet him. He was ignorant of whom she was—oh! of that she felt quite quite sure: she always wore a dark tippet round her shoulders, and a hood to cover her head. He seemed pleased to see her, just to hear her voice. Obviously he was lonely and in deep trouble.

Then one night—it was the first balmy evening after the winter frosts—the moon was singularly bright, and the hood had fallen back from her head, just as her face was tilted upwards and her eyes glowing with enthusiasm. Then she knew that he had learnt to love her, not through any words which he spoke, for he was silent; his face was in shadow, and he did not even touch her; therefore it was not through any of her natural senses that she guessed his love. Yet she knew it, and her young heart was overfilled with happiness.

That evening when they parted he knelt at her feet and kissed the hem of her kirtle. After which, when she was back again in her own little room at Acol Court, she cried for very joy.

They did not meet very often. Once a week at most. He had vaguely promised to tell her, some day, of his great work for the regeneration of France, which he was carrying out in loneliness and exile here in England, a work far greater and more comprehensive than that which had secured for England religious and political liberty; this work it was which made him a wanderer on the face of the earth and caused his frequent and lengthy absences from the cottage in which he lodged.

She was quite content for the moment with these vague promises: in her heart she was evolving enchanting plans for the future, when she would be his helpmate in this great and mysterious work.

In the meanwhile she was satisfied to live in the present, to console and comfort the noble exile, to lavish on him the treasures of her young and innocent love, to endow him in her imagination with all those mental and physical attributes which her romantic nature admired most.

The spring had come, clothing the weird branches of the elms with a tender garb of green, the anemones in the woods yielded to the bluebells and these to carpets of primroses and violets. The forests of Thanet echoed with songs of linnets and white-throats. She was happy and she was in love.

With the lengthened days came some petty sorrows. He was obviously worried, sometimes even impatient. Their meetings became fewer and shorter, for the evening hours were brief. She found it difficult to wander out so late across the park, unperceived, and he would never meet her by day-light.

This no doubt had caused him to fret. He loved her and desired her all his own. Yet 'twere useless of a surety to ask Sir Marmaduke's consent to her marriage with her French prince. He would never give it, and until she came of age he had absolute power over her choice of a husband.

She had explained this to him and he had sighed and murmured angry words, then pressed her with increased passion to his heart.

To-night as she walked through the park, she was conscious—for the first time perhaps—of a certain alloy mixed with her gladness. Yet she loved him—oh, yes! just, just as much as ever. The halo of romance with which she had framed in his mystic personality was in no way dimmed, but in a sense she almost feared him, for at times his muffled voice sounded singularly vehement, and his words betrayed the uncontrolled violence of his nature.

She had hoped to bring him some reassuring news anent Sir Marmaduke de Chavasse's intentions with regard to herself, but the conversation round the skittle-alley, her guardian's cruel allusions to "the foreign adventurer," had shown her how futile were such hopes.

Yet, there were only three months longer of this weary waiting. Surely he could curb his impatience until she was of age and mistress of her own hand! Surely he trusted her!

She sighed as this thought crossed her mind, and nearly fell up against a dark figure which detached itself from among the trees.

"Master Lambert!" she said, uttering a little cry of surprise, pressing her hand against her heart which was palpitating with emotion. "I had no thought of meeting you here."

"And I still less of seeing your ladyship," he rejoined coldly.

"How cross you are," she retorted with childish petulance, "what have I done that you should be so unkind?"

"Unkind?"

"Aye! I had meant to speak to you of this ere now—but you always avoid me . . . you scarce will look at me . . . and . . . and I wished to ask you if I had offended you?"

They were standing on a soft carpet of moss, overhead the gentle summer breeze stirred the great branches of the elms, causing the crisp leaves to mutter a long-drawn hush-sh-sh in the stillness of the night. From far away came the appealing call of a blackbird chased by some marauding owl, while on the ground close by, the creaking of tiny branches betrayed the quick scurrying of a squirrel. From the remote and infinite distance came the subdued roar of the sea.

The peace of the woodland, the sighing of the trees, the dark evening sky above, filled his heart with an aching longing for her.

"Offended me?" he murmured, passing his hand across his forehead, for his temples throbbed and his eyes were burning. "Nay! why should you think so?"

"You are so cold, so distant now," she said gently. "We were such good friends when first I came here. Thanet is a strange country to me. It seems weird and unkind—the woods are dark and lonely, that persistent sound of the sea fills me with a strange kind of dread. . . . My home was among the Surrey hills you know. . . . It is far from here. . . . I cannot afford to lose a friend. . . ."

She sighed, a quaint, wistful little sigh, curiously out of place, he thought, in this exquisite mouth framed only for smiles.

"I have so few real friends," she added in a whisper, so low that he thought she had not spoken, and that the elms had sighed that pathetic phrase into his ear.

"Believe me, Lady Sue, I am neither cold nor distant," he said, almost smiling now, for the situation appeared strange indeed, that this beautiful young girl, rich, courted, surrounded by an army of sycophants, should be appealing to a poor dependent for friendship. "I am only a little dazed . . . as any man would be who had been dreaming . . . and saw that dream vanish away. . . ."

"Dreaming?"

"Yes!—we all dream sometimes you know . . . and a penniless man like myself, without prospects or friends is, methinks, more prone to it than most."

"We all have dreams sometimes," she said, speaking very low, whilst her eyes sought to pierce the darkness beyond the trees. "I too . . ."

She paused abruptly, and was quite still for a moment, almost holding her breath, he thought, as if she were listening. But not a sound came to disturb the silence of the woods. Blackbird and owl had ceased their fight for life, the squirrel had gone to rest: the evening air was filled only by the great murmur of the distant sea.

"Tell me your dream," she said abruptly.

"Alas! it is too foolish! . . . too mad! . . . too impossible. . . ."

"But you said once that you would be my friend and would try to cheer my loneliness."

"So I will, with all my heart, an you will permit."

"Yet is there no friendship without confidence," she retorted. "Tell me your dream."

"What were the use? You would only laugh . . . and justly too."

"I should never laugh at that which made you sad," she said gently.

"Sad?" he rejoined with a short laugh, which had something of his usual bitterness in it. "Sad? Mayhap! Yet I hardly know. Think you that the poor peasant lad would be sad because he had dreamed that the fairy princess whom he had seen from afar in her radiance, was sweet and gracious to him one midsummer's day? It was only a dream, remember: when he woke she had vanished . . . gone out of his sight . . . hidden from him by a barrier of gold. . . . In front of this barrier stood his pride . . . which perforce would have to be trampled down and crushed ere he could reach the princess."

She did not reply, only bent her sweet head, lest he should perceive the tears which had gathered in her eyes. All round them the wood seemed to have grown darker and more dense, whilst from afar the weird voice of that distant sea murmured of infinity and of the relentlessness of Fate.

They could not see one another very clearly, yet she knew that he was gazing at her with an intensity of love and longing in his heart which caused her own to ache with sympathy; and he knew that she was crying, that there was something in that seemingly brilliant and happy young life, which caused the exquisite head to droop as if under a load of sorrow.

A broken sigh escaped her lips, or was it the sighing of the wind in the elms?

He was smitten with remorse to think that he should have helped to make her cry.

"Sue—my little, beautiful Sue," he murmured, himself astonished at his own temerity in thus daring to address her. It was her grief which had brought her down to his level: the instinct of chivalry, of protection, of friendship which had raised him up to hers.

"Will you ever forgive me?" he said, "I had no right to speak to you as I have done. . . . And yet . . ."

He paused and she repeated his last two words—gently, encouragingly.

"And yet . . . good master?"

"Yet at times, when I see the crowd of young, empty-headed fortune-seeking jackanapes, who dare to aspire to your ladyship's hand . . . I have asked myself whether perchance I had the right to remain silent, whilst they poured their farrago of nonsense into your ear. I love you, Sue!"

"No! no! good master!" she ejaculated hurriedly, while a nameless, inexplicable fear seemed suddenly to be holding her in its grip, as he uttered those few very simple words which told the old, old tale.

But those words once uttered, Richard felt that he could not now draw back. The jealously-guarded secret had escaped his lips, passion refused to be held longer in check. A torrent of emotion overmastered him. He forgot where he was, the darkness of the night, the lateness of the hour, the melancholy murmur of the wind in the trees, he forgot that she was rich and he a poor dependent, he only remembered that she was exquisitely fair and that he—poor fool!—was mad enough to worship her.

It was very dark now, for a bank of clouds hid the glory of the evening sky, and he could see only the mere outline of the woman whom he so passionately loved, the small head with the fluttering curls fanned by the wind, the graceful shoulders and arms folded primly across her bosom.

He put out his hand and found hers. Oh! the delight of raising it to his lips.

"By the heaven above us, Sue, by all my hopes of salvation I swear to you that my love is pure and selfless," he murmured tenderly, all the while that her fragrant little hand was pressed against his lips. "But for your fortune, I had come to you long ago and said to you 'Let me work for you!—My love will help me to carve a fortune for you, which it shall be my pride to place at your feet.'—Every nameless child, so 'tis said, may be a king's son . . . and I, who have no name that I can of verity call mine own—no father—no kith or kindred—I would conquer a kingdom, Sue, if you but loved me too."

His voice broke in a sob. Ashamed of his outburst he tried to hide his confusion from her, by sinking on one knee on that soft carpet of moss. From the little village of Acol beyond the wood, came the sound of the church bell striking the hour of nine. Sue was silent and absorbed, intensely sorrowful to see the grief of her friend. He was quite lost in the shadows at her feet now, but she could hear the stern efforts which he made to resume control over himself and his voice.

"Richard . . . good Richard," she said soothingly, "believe me, I am very, very sorry for this. . . . I . . . I vow I did not know. . . . I had no thought—how could I have? that you cared for me like . . . like this. . . . You believe me, good master, do you not?" she entreated. "Say that you believe me, when I say that I would not willingly have caused you such grief."

"I believe that you are the most sweet and pure woman in all the world," he murmured fervently, "and that you are as far beyond my reach as are the stars."

"Nay, nay, good master, you must not talk like that. . . . Truly, truly I am only a weak and foolish girl, and quite unworthy of your deep devotion . . . and you must try . . . indeed, indeed you must . . . to forget what happened under these trees to-night."

"Of that I pray you have no fear," he replied more calmly, as he rose and once more stood before her—a dark figure in the midst of the dark wood—immovable, almost impassive, with head bent and arms folded across his chest. "Nathless 'tis foolish for a nameless peasant even to talk of his honor, yet 'tis mine honor, Lady Sue, which will ever help me to remember that a mountain of gold and vast estates stand between me and the realization of my dream."

"No, no," she rejoined earnestly, "it is not that only. You are my friend, good Richard, and I do not wish to see you eating out your heart in vain and foolish regrets. What you . . . what you wish could never—never be. Good master, if you were rich to-morrow and I penniless, I could never be your wife."

"You mean that you could never love me?" he asked.

She was silent. A fierce wave of jealousy—mad, insane, elemental jealousy seemed suddenly to sweep over him.

"You love someone else?" he demanded brusquely.

"What right have you to ask?"

"The right of a man who would gladly die to see you happy."

He spoke harshly, almost brutally. Jealousy had killed all humility in him. Love—proud, passionate and defiant—stood up for its just claims, for its existence, its right to dominate, its desire to conquer.

But even as he thus stood before her, almost frightening her now by the violence of his speech, by the latent passion in him, which no longer would bear to be held in check, the bank of clouds which up to now had obscured the brilliance of the summer sky, finally swept away eastwards, revealing the luminous firmament and the pale crescent moon which now glimmered coldly through the branches of the trees.

A muffled sound as of someone treading cautiously the thick bed of moss, and the creaking of tiny twigs caused Richard Lambert to look up momentarily from the form of the girl whom he so dearly loved, and to peer beyond her into the weirdly illumined density of the wood.

Not twenty yards from where they were, a low wall divided the park itself from the wood beyond, which extended down to Acol village. At an angle of the wall there was an iron gate, also the tumble-down pavilion, ivy-grown and desolate, with stone steps leading up to it, through the cracks of which weeds and moss sprouted up apace.

A man had just emerged from out the thicket and was standing now to the farther side of the gate looking straight at Lambert and at Sue, who stood in the full light of the moon. A broad-brimmed hat, such as cavaliers affected, cast a dark shadow over his face.

It was a mere outline only vaguely defined against the background of trees, but in that outline Lambert had already recognized the mysterious stranger who lodged in his brother's cottage down in Acol.

The fixed intensity of the young man's gaze caused Sue to turn and to look in the same direction. She saw the stranger, who encountering two pairs of eyes fixed on him, raised his hat with a graceful flourish of the arm: then, with a short ironical laugh, went his way, and was once more lost in the gloom.

The girl instinctively made a movement as if to follow him, whilst a quickly smothered cry—half of joy and half of fear—escaped her lips. She checked the movement as well as the cry, but not before Richard Lambert had perceived both.

With the perception came the awful, overwhelming certitude.

"That adventurer!" he exclaimed involuntarily. "Oh my God!"

But she looked him full in the face, and threw back her head with a gesture of pride and of wrath.

"Master Lambert," she said haughtily, "methinks 'twere needless to remind you that—since I inadvertently revealed my most cherished secret to you—it were unworthy a man of honor to betray it to any one."

"My lady . . . Sue," he said, feeling half-dazed, bruised and crushed by the terrible moral blow, which he had just received, "I . . . I do not quite understand. Will you deign to explain?"

"There is naught to explain," she retorted coldly. "Prince Amédé d'Orléans loves me and I have plighted my troth to him."

"Nay! I entreat your ladyship," he said, feeling—knowing the while, how useless it was to make an appeal against the infatuation of a hot-headed and impulsive girl, yet speaking with the courage which oftentimes is born of despair, "I beg of you, on my knees to listen. This foreign adventurer . . ."

"Silence!" she retorted proudly, and drawing back from him, for of a truth he had sunk on his knees before her, "an you desire to be my friend, you must not breathe one word of slander against the man I love. . . ."

Then, as he said nothing, realizing, indeed, how futile would be any effort or word from him, she said, with growing enthusiasm, whilst her glowing eyes fixed themselves upon the gloom which had enveloped the mysterious apparition of her lover:

"Prince Amédé d'Orléans is the grandest, most selfless patriot this world hath ever known. For the sake of France, of tyrannized, oppressed France, which he adores, he has sacrificed everything! his position, his home, his wealth and vast estates: he is own kinsman to King Louis, yet he is exiled from his country whilst a price is set upon his head, because he cannot be mute whilst he sees tyranny and oppression grind down the people of France. He could return to Paris to-day a rich and free man, a prince among his kindred,—if he would but sacrifice that for which he fights so bravely: the liberty of France!"

"Sue! my adored lady," he entreated, "in the name of Heaven listen to me. . . . You do believe, do you not, that I am your friend? . . . I would give my life for you. . . . I swear to you that you have been deceived and tricked by this adventurer, who, preying upon your romantic imagination . . ."

"Silence, master, an you value my friendship!" she commanded. "I will not listen to another word. Nay! you should be thankful that I deal not more harshly with you—that I make allowances for your miserable jealousy. . . . Oh! why did you make me say that," she added with one of those swift changes of mood, which were so characteristic of her, and with sudden contrition, for an involuntary moan had escaped his lips. "In the name of Heaven, go—go now I entreat . . . leave me to myself . . . lest anger betray me into saying cruel things . . . I am safe—quite safe . . . I entreat you to let me return to the house alone."

Her voice sounded more and more broken as she spoke: sobs were evidently rising in her throat. He pulled himself together, feeling that it were unmanly to worry her now, when emotion was so obviously overmastering her.

"Forgive me, sweet lady," he said quite gently, as he rose from his knees. "I said more than I had any right to say. I entreat you to forgive the poor, presuming peasant who hath dared to raise his eyes to the fairy princess of his dreams. I pray you to try and forget all that hath happened to-night beneath the shadows of these elms—and only to remember one thing: that my life—my lonely, humble, unimportant life—is yours . . . to serve or help you, to worship or comfort you if need be . . . and that there could be no greater happiness for me than to give it for your sweet sake."

He bowed very low, until his hand could reach the hem of her kirtle, which he then raised to his lips. She was infinitely sorry for him; all her anger against him had vanished.

He was very reluctant to go, for this portion of the park was some distance from the house. But she had commanded and he quite understood that she wished to be alone: love such as that which he felt for his sweet lady is ever watchful, yet ever discreet. Was it not natural that she did not care to look on him after he had angered her so?

She seemed impatient too, and although her feelings towards him had softened, she repeated somewhat nervously: "I pray you go! Good master, I would be alone."

Lambert hesitated a while longer, he looked all round him as if suspicious of any marauders that might be lurking about. The hour was not very late, and had she not commanded him to go?

Nor would he seem to pry on her movements. Having once made up his mind to obey, he did so without reserve. Having kissed the hem of her kirtle he turned towards the house.

He meant to keep on the tiny footpath, which she would be bound to traverse after him, when she returned. He felt sure that something would warn him if she really needed his help.

The park and woodland were still: only the mournful hooting of an owl, the sad sighing of the wind in the old elms broke the peaceful silence of this summer's night.

CHAPTER VII

THE STRANGER WITHIN THE GATES

Sue waited—expectant and still—until the last sound of the young man's footsteps had died away in the direction of the house.

Then with quick impulsive movements she ran to the gate; her hands sought impatiently in the dark for the primitive catch which held it to. A large and rusty bolt! she pulled at it—clumsily, for her hands were trembling. At last the gate flew open; she was out in the woods, peering into the moonlit thicket, listening for that most welcome sound, the footsteps of the man she loved.

"My prince!" she exclaimed, for already he was beside her—apparently he had lain in wait for her, and now held her in his arms.

"My beautiful and gracious lady," he murmured in that curiously muffled voice of his, which seemed to endow his strange personality with additional mystery.

"You heard? . . . you saw just now? . . ." she asked timidly, fearful of encountering his jealous wrath, that vehement temper of his which she had learned to dread.

Strangely enough he replied quite gently: "Yes . . . I saw . . . the young man loves you, my beautiful Suzanne! . . . and he will hate me now . . ."

He had always called her Suzanne—and her name thus spoken by him, and with that quaint foreign intonation of his had always sounded infinitely sweet.

"But I love you with all my heart," she said earnestly, tenderly, her whole soul—young, ardent, full of romance, going out to him with all the strength of its purity and passion. "What matter if all the world were against you?"

As a rule when they met thus on the confines of the wood, they would stand together by the gate, forming plans, talking of the future and of their love. Then after a while they would stroll into the park, he escorting her, as far as he might approach the house without being seen.

She had no thought that Richard Lambert would be on the watch. Nay! so wholly absorbed was she in her love for this man, once she was in his presence, that already—womanlike—she had forgotten the young student's impassioned avowal, his jealousy, his very existence.

And she loved these evening strolls in the great, peaceful park, at evening, when the birds were silent in their nests, and the great shadows of ivy-covered elms enveloped her and her romance. From afar a tiny light gleamed here and there in some of the windows of Acol Court.

She had hated the grim, bare house at first, so isolated in the midst of the forests of Thanet, so like the eyrie of a bird of prey.

But now she loved the whole place; the bit of ill-kept tangled garden, with its untidy lawn and weed-covered beds, in which a few standard rose-trees strove to find a permanent home; she loved the dark and mysterious park, the rusty gate, that wood with its rich carpet which varied as each season came around.

To-night her lover was more gentle than had been his wont of late. They walked cautiously through the park, for the moon was brilliant and outlined every object with startling vividness. The trees here were sparser. Close by was the sunk fence and the tiny rustic bridge—only a plank or two—which spanned it.

Some thirty yards ahead of them they could see the dark figure of Richard Lambert walking towards the house.

"One more stroll beneath the trees, *ma mie*," he said lightly, "you'll not wish to encounter your ardent suitor again."

She loved him in this brighter mood, when he had thrown from him that mantle of jealousy and mistrust which of late had sat on him so ill.

He seemed to have set himself the task of pleasing her to-night—of making her forget, mayhap, the wooing of the several suitors who had hung round her to-day. He talked to her—always in that mysterious, muffled voice, with the quaint rolling of the r's and the foreign intonation of the vowels—he talked to her of King Louis and his tyranny over the people of France: of his own political aims to which he had already sacrificed fortune, position, home. Of his own brilliant past at the most luxurious court the world had ever known. He fired her enthusiasm, delighted her imagination, enchained her soul to his: she was literally swept off the prosy face of this earth and whirled into a realm of romance, enchanting, intoxicating, mystic—almost divine.

She forgot fleeting time, and did not even hear the church bell over at Acol village striking the hour of ten.

He had to bring her back to earth, and to guide her reluctant footsteps again towards the house. But she was too happy to part from him so easily. She forced him to escort her over the little bridge, under the pretense of terror at the lateness of the hour. She vowed that he could not be perceived from the house, since all the lights were out, and everyone indeed must be abed. Her guardian's windows, moreover, gave on the other side of the house; and he of a surety would not be moon or star gazing at this hour of the night.

Her mood was somewhat reckless. The talk with which he had filled her ears had gone to her brain like wine. She felt intoxicated with the atmosphere of mystery, of selfless patriotism, of great and fallen fortunes, with which he knew so well how to surround himself. Mayhap, that in her innermost heart now there was a scarce conscious desire to precipitate a crisis, to challenge discovery, to step boldly before her guardian, avowing her love, demanding the right to satisfy it.

She refused to bid him adieu save at the garden door. Three steps led up straight into the dining-room from the flagged pathway which skirted the house. She ran up these steps, silently and swiftly as a little mouse, and then turned her proud and happy face to him.

"Good-night, sweet prince," she whispered, extending her delicate hand to him.

She stood in the full light of the moon dominating him from the top of the steps, an exquisite vision of youth and beauty and romance.

He took off his broad-brimmed hat, but his face was still in shadow, for the heavy perruque fell in thick dark curls covering both his cheeks. He bent very low and kissed the tips of her fingers.

"When shall we meet again, my prince?" she asked.

"This day week, an it please you, my queen," he murmured.

And then he turned to go. She meant to stand there and watch him cross the tangled lawn, and the little bridge, and to see him lose himself amidst the great shadows of the park.

But he had scarce gone a couple of steps when a voice, issuing from the doorway close behind her, caused her to turn in quick alarm.

"Sue! in the name of Heaven! what doth your ladyship here and at this hour?"

The crisis which the young girl had almost challenged, had indeed arrived. Mistress de Chavasse—carrying a lighted and guttering candle, was standing close behind her. At the sound of her voice and Sue's little cry of astonishment rather than fear, Prince Amédé d'Orléans too, had paused, with a muttered curse on his lips, his foot angrily tapping the flagstones.

But it were unworthy a gallant gentleman of the most chivalrous Court in the world to beat a retreat when his mistress was in danger of an unpleasant quarter of an hour.

Sue was more than a little inclined to be defiant.

"Mistress de Chavasse," she said quietly, "will you be good enough to explain by what right you have spied on me to-night? Hath my guardian perchance set you to dog my footsteps?"

"There was no thought in my mind of spying on your ladyship," rejoined Mistress de Chavasse coldly. "I was troubled in my sleep and came downstairs because I heard a noise, and feared those midnight marauders of which we have heard so much of late. I myself had locked this door, and was surprised to find it unlatched. I opened it and saw you standing there."

"Then we'll all to bed, fair mistress," rejoined Sue gayly. She was too happy, too sure of herself and of her lover to view this sudden discovery of her secret with either annoyance or alarm. She would be free in three months, and he would be faithful to her. Love proverbially laughs at bars and bolts, and even if her stern guardian, apprised of her evening wanderings, prevented her from seeing her prince for the next three months, pshaw! a hundred days at most, and nothing could keep her from his side.

"Good-night, fair prince," she repeated tenderly, extending her hand towards her lover once more, while throwing a look of proud defiance to Mistress de Chavasse. He could not help but return to the foot of the steps; any pusillanimity on his part at this juncture, any reluctance to meet Editha face to face or to bear the brunt of her reproaches and of her sneers, might jeopardize the romance of his personality in the eyes of Sue. Therefore he boldly took her hand and kissed it with mute fervor.

She gave a happy little laugh and added pertly:

"Good-night, mistress . . . I'll leave you to make your own adieux to Monseigneur le Prince d'Orléans. I'll warrant that you and he—despite the lateness of the hour—will have much to say to one another."

And without waiting to watch the issue of her suggestion, her eyes dancing with mischief, she turned and ran singing and laughing into the house.

CHAPTER VIII

PRINCE AMÉDÉ D'ORLÉANS

At first it seemed as if the stranger meant to beat a precipitate and none too dignified retreat now that the adoring eyes of Lady Sue were no longer upon him. But Mistress de Chavasse had no intention of allowing him to extricate himself quite so easily from an unpleasant position.

"One moment, master," she said loudly and peremptorily. "Prince or whatever you may wish to call yourself . . . ere you show me a clean pair of heels, I pray you to explain your presence here on Sir Marmaduke's doorstep at ten o'clock at night, and in company with his ward."

For a moment—a second or two only—the stranger appeared to hesitate. He paused with one foot still on the lowest of the stone steps, the other on the flagged path, his head bent, his hand upraised in the act of re-adjusting his broad-brimmed hat.

Then a sudden thought seemed to strike him, he threw back his head, gave a short laugh as if he were pleased with this new thought, then turned, meeting Mistress de Chavasse's stern gaze squarely and fully. He threw his hat down upon the steps and crossed his arms over his chest.

"One moment, mistress?" he said with an ironical bow. "I do not need one moment. I have already explained."

"Explained? how?" she retorted, "nay! I'll not be trifled with, master, and methinks you will find that Sir Marmaduke de Chavasse will expect some explanation—which will prove unpleasant to yourself—for your unwarrantable impudence in daring to approach his ward."

He put up his hand in gentle deprecation.

"Impudence? Oh, mistress?" he said reproachfully.

"Let me assure you, master," she continued with relentless severity, "that you were wise an you returned straightway to your lodgings now . . . packed your worldly goods and betook yourself and them to anywhere you please."

"Ah!" he sighed gently, "that is impossible."

"You would dare? . . ." she retorted.

"I would dare remain there, where my humble presence is most desired—beside the gracious lady who honors me with her love."

"You are insolent, master . . . and Sir Marmaduke . . ."

"Oh!" he rejoined lightly, "Sir Marmaduke doth not object."

"There, I fear me, you are in error, master! and in his name I now forbid you ever to attempt to speak to Lady Susannah Aldmarshe again."

This command, accompanied by a look of withering scorn, seemed to afford the stranger vast entertainment. He made the wrathful lady a low, ironical bow, and clapped his hands together laughing and exclaiming:

"Brava! brava! of a truth but this is excellent! Pray, mistress, will you deign to tell me if in this your bidding you have asked Sir Marmaduke for his opinion?"

"I need not to ask him. I ask you to go."

"Go? Whither?" he asked blandly.

"Out of my sight and off these grounds at once, ere I rouse the servants and have you whipped off like a dog!" she said, angered beyond measure at his audacity, his irony, his manner, suggestive of insolent triumph. His muffled voice with its curious foreign accent irritated her, as did the shadow of his perruque over his brow, and the black silk shade which he wore over one eye.

Even now in response to her violent outburst he broke into renewed laughter.

"Better and better! Ah, mistress," he said with a shake of the head, "of a truth you are more blind than I thought."

"You are more insolent, master, than I had thought possible."

"Yet meseems, fair lady, that in the lonely and mysterious stranger you might have remembered your humble and devoted servant," he said, drawing his figure up towards her.

"You! an old friend!" she said contemptuously. "I have ne'er set eyes on you in my life before."

"To think that the moon should be so treacherous," he rejoined imperturbably. "Will you not look a little closer, fair mistress, the shadows are somewhat dark, mayhap."

She felt his one eye fixed upon her with cold intentness, a strange feeling of superstitious dread suddenly crept over her from head to foot. Like a bird fascinated by a snake she came a little nearer, down the steps, towards him, her eyes, too, riveted on his face, that curious face of his, surrounded by the heavy perruque hiding ears and cheeks, the mouth overshadowed by the dark mustache, one eye concealed beneath the black silk shade.

He seemed amused at her terror and as she came nearer to him, he too, advanced a little until their eyes met—his, mocking, amused, restless; hers, intent and searching.

Thus they gazed at one another for a few seconds, whilst silence reigned around and the moon peered down cold and chaste from above, illumining the old house, the neglected garden, the vast park with its innumerable dark secrets and the mysteries which it hid.

She was the first to step back, to recoil before the ironical intensity of that fixed gaze. She felt as if she were in a dream, as if a nightmare assailed her, which in her wakeful hours would be dissipated by reason, by common sense, by sound and sober fact.

She even passed her hand across her eyes as if to sweep away from before her vision, a certain image which fancy had conjured up.

His laugh—strident and mocking—roused her from this dreamlike state.

"I . . . I . . . do not understand," she murmured.

"Yet it is so simple," he replied, "did you not ask me awhile ago if nothing could be done?"

"Who . . . who are you?" she whispered, and then repeated once again: "Who are you?"

"I am His Royal Highness, Prince Amédé d'Orléans," said Sir Marmaduke de Chavassee lightly, "the kinsman of His Majesty, King Louis of France, the mysterious foreigner who works for the religious and political freedom of his country, and on whose head *le roi soleil* hath set a price . . . and who, moreover, hath enflamed the romantic imagination of a beautiful young girl, thus winning her ardent love in the present and in the near future together with her vast fortune and estates."

He made a movement as if to remove his perruque but she stopped him with a gesture. She had understood. And in the brilliant moonlight a complete revelation of his personality might prove dangerous. Lady Sue herself might still—for aught they knew—be standing in the dark room behind—unseen yet on the watch.

He seemed vastly amused at her terror, and boldly took the hand with which she had arrested his act of total revelation.

"Nay! do you recognize your humble servant at last, fair Editha?" he queried. "On my honor, madam, Lady Sue is deeply enamored of me. What think you of my chances now?"

"You? You?" she repeated at intervals, mechanically, dazed still, lost in a whirl of conflicting emotions wherein fear, amazement, and a certain vein of superstitious horror fought a hard battle in her dizzy brain.

"The risks," she murmured more coherently.

"Bah!"

"If she discover you, before . . . before . . ."

"Before she is legally my wife? Pshaw! . . . Then of a truth my scheme will come to naught . . . But will you not own, Editha, that 'tis worth the risk?"

"Afterwards?" she asked, "afterwards?"

"Afterwards, mistress," he rejoined enigmatically, "afterwards sits on the knees of the gods."

And with a flourish of his broad-brimmed hat he turned on his heel and anon was lost in the shadows of the tall yew hedge.

How long she stood there watching that spot whereon he had been standing, she could not say. Presently she shivered; the night had turned cold. She heard the cry of some small bird attacked by a midnight prowler; was it the sparrow-hawk after its prey?

From the other side of the house came the sound of slow and firm footsteps, then the opening and shutting of a door.

Sir Marmaduke de Chavasse had played his part for to-night: silently as he had gone, so he returned to his room, whilst in another corner of the sparrow-hawk's nest a young girl slept, dreaming dreams of patriots and heroes, of causes nobly won, of poverty and obscurity gloriously endured.

Mistress de Chavasse with a sigh half of regret, half of indifference, finally turned her back on the moonlit garden and went within.

CHAPTER IX

SECRET SERVICE

Master Hymn-of-Praise Busy was excessively perturbed. Matters at the Court were taking a curious turn. That something of unusual moment had happened within the last few days he was thoroughly convinced, and still having it in his mind that he was especially qualified for the lucrative appointments in my Lord Protector's secret service—he thought this an excellent opportunity for perfecting himself in the art of investigation, shrewdly conducted, which he understood to be most essential for the due fulfillment of such appointments.

Thus we see him some few days later on a late afternoon, with back bent nearly double, eyes fixed steadily on the ground and his face a perfect mirror of thoughtful concentration within, slowly walking along the tiny footpath which wound in and out the groups of majestic elms in the park.

Musing and meditating, at times uttering strange and enigmatical exclamations, he reached the confines of the private grounds, the spot where the surrounding wall gave place to a low iron gate, where the disused pavilion stood out gray and forlorn-looking in the midst of the soft green of the trees, and where through the woods beyond the gate, could just be perceived the tiny light which issued from the blacksmith's cottage, the most outlying one in the village of Acol.

Master Hymn-of-Praise leaned thoughtfully against the ivy-covered wall. His eyes, roaming, searching, restless, pried all around him.

"Footprints!" he mused, "footprints which of a surety must mean that human foot hath lately trod this moss. Footprints moreover, which lead up the steps to the door of that pavilion, wherein to my certain knowledge, no one hath had access of late."

Something, of course, was going on at Acol Court, that strange and inexplicable something which he had tried to convey by covert suggestion to Mistress Charity's female—therefore inferior—brain.

Sir Marmaduke's temper was more sour and ill even than of yore, and there was still an unpleasant sensation in the lumbar regions of Master Busy's spine, whenever he sat down, which recalled a somewhat vigorous outburst of his master's ill-humor.

Mistress de Chavasse went about the house like a country wench frightened by a ghost, and Mistress Charity averred that she seldom went to bed now before midnight. Certain it is that Master Busy himself had met the lady wandering about the house candle in hand at an hour when all respectable folk should be abed, and when she almost fell up against Hymn-of-Praise in the dark she gave a frightened scream as if she had suddenly come face to face with the devil.

Then there was her young ladyship.

She was neither ill-tempered nor yet under the ban of fear, but Master Busy vowed unto himself that she was suffering from ill-concealed melancholy, from some hidden secret or wild romance. She seldom laughed, she had spoken with discourtesy and impatience to Squire Pyncheon, who rode over the other day on purpose to bring her a bunch of sweet marjoram which grew in great profusion in his mother's garden: she markedly avoided the company of her guardian, and wandered about the park alone, at all hours of the day—a proceeding which in a young lady of her rank was quite unseemly.

All these facts neatly docketed in Master Busy's orderly brain, disturbed him not a little. He had not yet made up his mind as to the nature of the mystery which was surrounding the Court and its inmates, but vaguely he thought of abductions and elopements, which the presence of the richest heiress in the South of England in the house of the poorest squire in the whole country, more than foreshadowed.

This lonely, somewhat eerie corner of the park appeared to be the center around which all the mysterious happenings revolved, and Master Hymn-of-Praise had found his way hither on this fine July afternoon, because he had distinct hopes of finding out something definite, certain facts which

he then could place before Squire Boatfield who was major-general of the district, and who would then, doubtless, commend him for his ability and shrewdness in forestalling what might prove to be a terrible crime.

The days were getting shorter now; it was little more than eight o'clock and already the shades of evening were drawing closely in: the last rays of the setting sun had long disappeared in a glowing haze of gold, and the fantastic branches of the old elms, intertwined with the parasitic ivy looked grim and threatening, silhouetted against the lurid after glow. Master Busy liked neither the solitude, nor yet the silence of the woods; he had just caught sight of a bat circling over the dilapidated roof of the pavilion, and he hated bats. Though he belonged to a community which denied the angels and ignored the saints, he had a firm belief in the existence of a tangible devil, and somehow he could not dissociate his ideas of hell and of evil spirits from those which related to the mysterious flutterings of bats.

Moreover he thought that his duties in connection with the science of secret investigation, had been sufficiently fulfilled for the day, and he prepared to wend his way back to the house, when the sound of voices, once more aroused his somnolent attention.

"Someone," he murmured within himself, "the heiress and the abductor mayhap."

This might prove the opportunity of his life, the chance which would place him within the immediate notice of the major-general, perhaps of His Highness the Protector himself. He felt that to vacate his post of observation at this moment would be unworthy the moral discipline which an incipient servant of the Commonwealth should impose upon himself.

Striving to smother a sense of terror, or to disguise it even to himself under the mask of officiousness, he looked about for a hiding-place—a post of observation as he called it.

A tree with invitingly forked branches seemed to be peculiarly adapted to his needs. Hymn-of-Praise was neither very young nor very agile, but dreams of coming notoriety lent nimbleness to his limbs.

By the time that the voices drew nearer, the sober butler of Acol Court was installed astride an elm bough, hidden by the dense foliage and by the leaf-laden strands of ivy, enfolded by the fast gathering shadows of evening, supremely uncomfortable physically, none too secure on his perch, yet proud and satisfied in the consciousness of fulfilled duty.

The next moment he caught sight of Mistress Charity—Mistress Charity so please you, who had plighted her troth to him, walking arm in arm with Master Courage Toogood, as impudent, insolent and debauched a young jackanapes as ever defaced the forests of Thanet.

"Mistress, fair mistress," he was sighing, and murmuring in her ear, "the most beautiful and gracious thing on God's earth, when I hold you pressed thus against my beating heart . . ."

Apparently his feelings were too deep to be expressed in the words of his own vocabulary, for he paused a while, sighed audibly, and then asked anxiously:

"You do hear my heart beating, mistress, do you not?"

She blushed, for she was naught but a female baggage, and though Master Busy's impassioned protestations of less than half an hour ago, must be still ringing in her ears, she declared emphatically that she could hear the throbbing of that young vermin's heart.

Master Busy up aloft was quite sure that what she heard was a few sheep and cattle of Sir Marmaduke's who were out to grass in a field close by, and had been scared into a canter.

What went on for the next moment or two the saintly man on the elm tree branch could not rightly perceive, but the next words from Mistress Charity's lips sent a thrill of indignation through his heart.

"Oh! Master Courage," she said with a little cry, "you must not squeeze me so! I vow you have taken the breath out of my body! The Lord love you, child! think you I can stay here all this while and listen to your nonsense?"

"Just one minute longer, fair mistress," entreated the young reprobate, "the moon is not yet up, the birds have gone to their nests for sleep, will ye not tarry a while here with me? That old fool Busy will never know!"

It is a fact that at this juncture the saintly man well-nigh fell off his perch, and when Master Courage, amidst many coy shrieks from the fickle female, managed to drag her down beside him, upon the carpet of moss immediately beneath the very tree whereon Hymn-of-Praise was holding watch, the unfortunate man had need of all his strength of mind and of purpose not to jump down with both feet upon the lying face of that young limb of Satan.

But he felt that the discovery of his somewhat undignified position by these two evil-doers would not at this moment be quite opportune, so he endeavored to maintain his equilibrium at the cost of supreme discomfort, and the loud cracking of the branch on which he was perched.

Mistress Charity gave a cry of terror.

"What was that?"

"Nothing, nothing, mistress, I swear," rejoined Courage reassuringly, "there are always noises in old elm trees, the ivy hangs heavy and . . ."

"I have heard it said of late that the pavilion is haunted," she murmured under her breath.

"No! not haunted, mistress! I vow 'tis but the crackling of loose branches, and there is that which I would whisper in your ear . . ."

But before Master Courage had the time to indulge in this, the desire of his heart, something fell upon the top of his lean head which certainly never grew on the elm tree overhead. Having struck his lanky hair the object fell straight into his lap.

It was a button. An ordinary, brown, innocent enough looking button. But still a button. Master Courage took it in his hand and examined it carefully, turning it over once or twice. The little thing certainly wore a familiar air. Master Courage of a truth had seen such an one before.

"That thing never grew up there, master," said Mistress Charity in an agitated whisper.

"No!" he rejoined emphatically, "nor yet doth a button form part of the habiliments of a ghost."

But not a sound came from above: and though Courage and Charity peered upwards with ever-increasing anxiety, the fast gathering darkness effectually hid the mystery which lurked within that elm.

"I vow that there's something up there, mistress," said the youth with sudden determination.

"Could it be bats, master?" she queried with a shudder.

"Nay! but bats do not wear buttons," he replied sententiously. "Yet of a surety, I mean to make an investigation of the affair as that old fool Hymn-of-Praise would say."

Whereupon, heedless of Mistress Charity's ever-growing agitation, he ran towards the boundary wall of the park, and vaulted the low gate with an agile jump even as she uttered a pathetic appeal to him not to leave her alone in the dark.

Fear had rooted the girl to the spot. She dared not move away, fearful lest her running might entice that mysterious owner of the brown button to hurry in her track. Yet she would have loved to follow Master Courage, and to put at least a gate and wall between herself and those terrible elms.

She was just contemplating a comprehensive and vigorous attack of hysterics when she heard Master Courage's voice from the other side of the gate.

"Hist! Hist, mistress! Quick!"

She gathered up what shreds of valor she possessed and ran blindly in the direction whence came the welcome voice.

"I pray you take this," said the youth, who was holding a wooden bucket out over the gate, "whilst I climb back to you."

"But what is it, master?" she asked, as—obeying him mechanically—she took the bucket from him. It was heavy, for it was filled almost to the brim with a liquid which seemed very evil-smelling.

The next moment Master Courage was standing beside her. He took the bucket from her and then walked as rapidly as he could with it back towards the elm tree.

"It will help me to dislodge the bats, mistress," he said enigmatically, speaking over his shoulder as he walked.

She followed him—excited but timorous—until together they once more reached the spot, where Master Courage's amorous declarations had been so rudely interrupted. He put the bucket down beside him, and rubbed his hands together whilst uttering certain sounds which betrayed his glee.

Then only did she notice that he was carrying under one arm a long curious-looking instrument—round and made of tin, with a handle at one end.

She looked curiously into the bucket and at the instrument.

"'Tis the tar-water used for syringing the cattle," she whispered, "ye must not touch it, master. Where did you find it?"

"Just by the wall," he rejoined. "I knew it was kept there. They wash the sheep with it to destroy the vermin in them. This is the squirt for it," he added calmly, placing the end of the instrument in the liquid, "and I will mayhap destroy the vermin which is lodged in that elm tree."

A cry of terror issuing from above froze the very blood in Mistress Charity's veins.

"Stop! stop! you young limb of Satan!" came from Master Busy's nearly choking throat.

"It's evildoers or evil spirits, master," cried Mistress Charity in an agony of fear.

"Whatever it be, mistress, this should destroy it!" said Master Courage philosophically, as turning the syringe upwards he squirted the whole of its contents straight into the fork of the ivy-covered branches.

There was a cry of rage, followed by a cry of terror, then Master Hymn-of-Praise Busy with a terrific clatter of breaking boughs, fell in a heap upon the soft carpet of moss.

Master Courage be it said to the eternal shame of venturesome youth, took incontinently to his heels, leaving Mistress Charity to bear the brunt of the irate saintly man's wrath.

Master Busy, we must admit had but little saintliness left in him now. Let us assume that—as he explained afterwards—he was not immediately aware of Mistress Charity's presence, and that his own sense of propriety and of decorum had been drowned in a cataract of tar water. Certain it is that a volley of oaths, which would have surprised Sir Marmaduke himself, escaped his lips.

Had he not every excuse? He was dripping from head to foot, spluttering, blinded, choked and bruised.

He shook himself like a wet spaniel. Then hearing the sound of a smothered exclamation which did not seem altogether unlike a giggle, he turned round savagely and perceived the dim outline of Mistress Charity's dainty figure.

"The Lord love thee, Master Hymn-of-Praise," she began, somewhat nervously, "but you have made yourself look a sight."

"And by G—d I'll make that young jackanapes look a sight ere I take my hand off him," he retorted savagely.

"But what were you . . . hem! what wert thou doing up in the elm tree, friend Hymn-of-Praise?" she asked demurely.

"Thee me no thou!" he said with enigmatic pompousness, followed by a distinctly vicious snarl, "Master Busy will be my name in future for a saucy wench like thee."

He turned towards the house. Mistress Charity following meekly—somewhat subdued, for Master Busy was her affianced husband, and she had no mind to mar her future, through any of young Courage's dare-devil escapades.

"Thou wouldst wish to know what I was doing up in that forked tree?" he asked her with calm dignity after a while, when the hedges of the flower garden came in sight. "I was making a home for thee, according to the commands of the Lord."

"Not in the elm trees of a surety, Master Busy?"

"I was making a home for thee," he repeated without heeding her flippant observation, "by rendering myself illustrious. I told thee, wench, did I not? that something was happening within the precincts of Acol Court, and that it is my duty to lie in wait and to watch. The heiress is about to be abducted, and it is my task to frustrate the evil designs of the mysterious criminal."

She looked at him in speechless amazement. He certainly looked strangely weird in the semi-darkness with his lanky hair plastered against his cheeks, his collar half torn from round his neck, the dripping, oily substance flowing in rivulets from his garments down upon the ground.

The girl had no longer any desire to laugh, and when Master Busy strode majestically across the rustic bridge, then over the garden paths to the kitchen quarter of the house, she followed him without a word, awed by his extraordinary utterances, vaguely feeling that in his dripping garments he somehow reminded her of Jonah and the whale.

CHAPTER X

AVOWED ENMITY

The pavilion had been built some fifty years ago, by one of the Spantons of Acol who had a taste for fanciful architecture.

It had been proudly held by several deceased representatives of the family to be the reproduction of a Greek temple. It certainly had columns supporting the portico, and steps leading thence to the ground. It was also circular in shape and was innocent of windows, deriving its sole light from the door, when it was open.

The late Sir Jeremy, I believe, had been very fond of the place. Being of a somewhat morose and taciturn disposition, he liked the seclusion of this lonely corner of the park. He had a chair or two put into the pavilion and 'twas said that he indulged there in the smoking of that fragrant weed which of late had been more generously imported into this country.

After Sir Jeremy's death, the pavilion fell into disuse. Sir Marmaduke openly expressed his dislike of the forlorn hole, as he was wont to call it. He caused the door to be locked, and since then no one had entered the little building. The key, it was presumed, had been lost; the lock certainly looked rusty. The roof, too, soon fell into disrepair, and no doubt within, the place soon became the prey of damp and mildew, the nest of homing birds, or the lair of timid beasts. Very soon the proud copy of an archaic temple took on that miserable and forlorn look peculiar to uninhabited spots.

From an air of abandonment to that of eeriness was but a step, and now the building towered in splendid isolation, in this remote corner of the park, at the confines of the wood, with a reputation for being the abode of ghosts, of bats and witches, and other evil things.

When Master Busy sought for tracks of imaginary criminals bent on abducting the heiress he naturally drifted to this lonely spot; when Master Courage was bent on whispering sweet nothings into the ear of the other man's betrothed, he enticed her to that corner of the park where he was least like to meet the heavy-booted saint.

Thus it was that these three met on the one spot where as a rule at a late hour of the evening Prince Amédé d'Orléans was wont to commence his wanderings, sure of being undisturbed, and with the final disappearance of Master Busy and Mistress Charity the place was once more deserted.

The bats once more found delight in this loneliness and from all around came that subdued murmur, that creaking of twigs, that silence so full of subtle sounds, which betrays the presence of animal life on the prowl.

Anon there came the harsh noise of a key grating in a rusty lock. The door of the pavilion was cautiously opened from within and the mysterious French prince, bewigged, booted and hatted, emerged into the open. The night had drawn a singularly dark mantle over the woods. Banks of cloud obscured the sky; the tall elm trees with their ivy-covered branches, and their impenetrable shadows beneath, formed a dense wall which the sight of human creatures was not keen enough to pierce. Sir Marmaduke de Chavasse, in spite of this darkness, which he hailed gleefully, peered cautiously and intently round as he descended the steps.

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