

Weyman Stanley John

The Story of Francis Cludde



Stanley Weyman
The Story of Francis Cludde

*http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=23152891
The Story of Francis Cludde:*

Содержание

CHAPTER I	4
CHAPTER II	21
CHAPTER III	37
CHAPTER IV	54
CHAPTER V	71
CHAPTER VI	88
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	102

Weyman Stanley John

The Story of Francis Cludde

CHAPTER I

"HÉ, SIRE ANE, HÉ!"

On the boundary line between the two counties of Warwick and Worcester there is a road very famous in those parts, and called the Ridgeway. Father Carey used to say-and no better Latinist could be found for a score of miles round in the times of which I write-that it was made by the Romans. It runs north and south along the narrow spine of the country, which is spread out on either side like a map, or a picture. As you fare southward you see on your right hand the green orchards and pastures of Worcestershire stretching as far as the Malvern Hills. You have in front of you Bredon Hill, which is a wonderful hill, for if a man goes down the Avon by boat it goes with him-now before, and now behind-a whole day's journey-and then stands in the same place. And on the left hand you have the great Forest of Arden, and not much besides, except oak trees, which grow well in Warwickshire.

I describe this road, firstly, because it is a notable one, and forty years ago was the only Queen's highway, to call a highway,

in that country. The rest were mere horse-tracks. Secondly, because the chase wall of Coton End runs along the side of it for two good miles; and the Cluddes-I am Francis Cludde-have lived at Coton End by the Ridgeway time out of mind, probably-for the name smacks of the soil-before the Romans made the road. And thirdly, because forty years ago, on a drizzling February day in 1555-second year of Mary, old religion just reestablished-a number of people were collected on this road, forming a group of a score or more, who stood in an ordered kind of disorder about my uncle's gates and looked all one way, as if expecting an arrival, and an arrival of consequence.

First, there was my uncle Sir Anthony, tall and lean. He wore his best black velvet doublet and cloak, and had put them on with an air of huge importance. This increased each time he turned, staff in hand, and surveyed his following, and as regularly gave place to a "Pshaw!" of vexation and a petulant glance when his eye rested on me. Close beside him, looking important too, but anxious and a little frightened as well, stood good Father Carey. The priest wore his silk cassock, and his lips moved from time to time without sound, as though he were trying over a Latin oration-which, indeed, was the fact. At a more respectful distance were ranged Baldwin Moor, the steward, and a dozen servants; while still farther away lounged as many ragamuffins-landless men, who swarmed about every gentleman's door in those times, and took toll of such abbey lands as the king might have given him. Against one of the stone gate-pillars I leaned

myself-nineteen years and six months old, and none too wise, though well grown, and as strong as one here and there. And perched on the top of the twin post, with his chin on his knees, and his hands clasped about them, was Martin Luther, the fool.

Martin had chosen this elevated position partly out of curiosity, and partly, perhaps, under a strong sense of duty. He knew that, whether he would or no, he must needs look funny up there. His nose was red, and his eyes were running, and his teeth chattering; and he did look funny. But as he felt the cold most his patience failed first. The steady, silent drizzle, the mist creeping about the stems of the oak trees, the leaden sky proved too much for him in the end. "A watched pot never boils!" he grumbled.

"Silence, sirrah!" commanded my uncle angrily. "This is no time for your fooling. Have a care how you talk in the same breath of pots and my Lord Bishop!"

"*Sanctæ ecclesiæ*," Father Carey broke out, turning up his eyes in a kind of ecstasy, as though he were knee to knee with the prelate-"*te defensorem inclytum atque ardentem*-"

"*Pottum!*" cried I, laughing loudly at my own wit.

It was an ill-mannered word, but I was cold and peevish. I had been forced to this function against my will. I had never seen the guest whom we were expecting, and who was no other than the Queen's Chancellor, Stephen Gardiner, but I disliked him as if I had. In truth, he was related to us in a peculiar fashion, which my uncle and I naturally looked at from different standpoints. Sir Anthony viewed with complacence, if not with

pride, any connection with the powerful Bishop of Winchester, for the knight knew the world, and could appreciate the value it sets on success, and the blind eyes it has for spots if they do but speckle the risen sun. I could make no such allowance, but, with the pride of youth and family, at once despised the great Bishop for his base blood, and blushed that the shame lay on our side. I hated this parade of doing honor to him, and would fain have hidden at home with Petronilla, my cousin, Sir Anthony's daughter, and awaited our guest there. The knight, however, had not permitted this, and I had been forced out, being in the worst of humors.

So I said "*Pottum!*" and laughed.

"Silence, boy!" cried Sir Anthony fiercely. He loved an orderly procession, and to arrange things decently. "Silence!" he repeated, darting an angry glance first at me and then at his followers, "or I will warm that jacket of yours, lad! And you, Martin Luther, see to your tongue for the next twenty-four hours, and keep it off my Lord Bishop! And, Father Carey, hold yourself ready-"

"For here Sir Hot-Pot cometh!" cried the undaunted Martin, skipping nimbly down from his post of vantage; "and a dozen of London saucepans with him, or may I never lick the inside of one again!"

A jest on the sauciness of London serving-men was sure to tell with the crowd, and there was a great laugh at this, especially among the landless men, who were on the skirts of the party,

and well sheltered from Sir Anthony's eye. He glared about him, provoked to find at this critical moment smiles where there should have been looks of deference, and a ring round a fool where he had marshaled a procession. Unluckily, he chose to visit his displeasure upon me. "You won't behave, won't you, you puppy!" he cried. "You won't, won't you!" and stepping forward he aimed a blow at my shoulders, which would have made me rub myself if it had reached me. But I was too quick. I stepped back, the stick swung idly, and the crowd laughed.

And there the matter would have ended, for the Bishop's party were now close upon us, had not my foot slipped on the wet grass and I fallen backward. Seeing me thus at his mercy, the temptation proved too much for the knight. He forgot his love of seemliness and even that his visitors were at his elbow-and, stooping a moment to plant home a couple of shrewd cuts, cried, "Take that! Take that, my lad!" in a voice that rang as crisply as his thwacks.

I was up in an instant; not that the pain was anything, and before our own people I should have thought as little of shame, for if the old may not lay hand to the young, being related, where is to be any obedience? Now, however, my first glance met the grinning faces of strange lackeys, and while my shoulders still smarted, the laughter of a couple of soberly-clad pages stung a hundred times more sharply. I glared furiously round, and my eyes fell on one face-a face long remembered. It was that of a man who neither smiled nor laughed; a man whom I

recognized immediately, not by his sleek hackney or his purple cassock, which a riding-coat partially concealed, or even by his jeweled hand, but by the keen glance of power which passed over me, took me in, and did not acknowledge me; which saw my humiliation without interest or amusement. The look hurt me beyond smarting of shoulders, for it conveyed to me in the twentieth part of a second how very small a person Francis Cludde was, and how very great a personage was Stephen Gardiner, whom in my thoughts I had presumed to belittle.

I stood irresolute a moment, shifting my feet and glowering at him, my face on fire. But when he raised his hand to give the Benediction, and the more devout, or those with mended hose, fell on their knees in the mud, I turned my back abruptly, and, climbing the wall, flung away across the chase.

"What, Sir Anthony!" I heard him say as I stalked off, his voice ringing clear and incisive amid the reverential silence which followed the Latin words; "have we a heretic here, cousin? How is this? So near home too!"

"It is my nephew, my Lord Bishop," I could hear Sir Anthony answer, apology in his tone; "and a willful boy at times. You know of him; he has queer notions of his own, put into his head long ago."

I caught no more, my angry strides carrying me out of earshot. Fuming, I hurried across the long damp grass, avoiding here and there the fallen limb of an elm or a huge round of holly. I wanted to get out of the way, and be out of the way; and made such haste

that before the slowly moving cavalcade had traversed one-half of the interval between the road and the house I had reached the bridge which crossed the moat, and, pushing my way impatiently through the maids and scullions who had flocked to it to see the show, had passed into the courtyard.

The light was failing, and the place looked dark and gloomy in spite of the warm glow of burning logs which poured from the lower windows, and some show of green boughs which had been placed over the doorways in honor of the occasion. I glanced up at a lattice in one of the gables—the window of Petronilla's little parlor. There was no face at it, and I turned fretfully into the hall—and yes, there she was, perched up in one of the high window-seats. She was looking out on the chase, as the maids were doing.

Yes, as the maids were doing. She too was watching for his High Mightiness, I muttered, and that angered me afresh. I crossed the rushes in silence, and climbed up beside her.

"Well," I said ungraciously, as she started, hearing me at her shoulder, "well, have you seen enough of him yet, cousin? You will, I warrant you, before he leaves. A little of him goes far."

"A little of whom, Francis?" she asked simply.

Though her voice betrayed some wonder at my rough tone, she was so much engaged with the show that she did not look at me immediately. This of course kept my anger warm, and I began to feel that she was in the conspiracy against me.

"Of my Lord of Winchester, of course," I answered, laughing rudely; "of Sir Hot-Pot!"

"Why do you call him that?" she remonstrated in gentle wonder. And then she did turn her soft dark eyes upon me. She was a slender, willowy girl in those days, with a complexion clear yet pale—a maiden all bending and gracefulness, yet with a great store of secret firmness, as I was to learn. "He seems as handsome an old man," she continued, "as I have ever met, and stately and benevolent, too, as I see him at this distance. What is the matter with you, Francis? What has put you out?"

"Put me out!" I retorted angrily. "Who said anything had put me out?"

But I reddened under her eyes; I was longing to tell her all, and be comforted, while at the same time I shrank with a man's shame from saying to her that I had been beaten.

"I can see that something is the matter," she said sagely, with her head on one side, and that air of being the elder which she often assumed with me, though she was really the younger by two years. "Why did you not wait for the others? Why have you come home alone? Francis," [with sudden conviction] "you have vexed my father! That is it!"

"He has beaten me like a dog!" I blurted out passionately; "and before them all! Before those strangers he flogged me!"

She had her back to the window, and some faint gleam of wintry sunshine, passing through the gules of the shield blazoned behind her, cast a red stain on her dark hair and shapely head. She was silent, probably through pity or consternation; but I could not see her face, and misread her. I thought her hard, and, resenting

this, bragged on with a lad's empty violence.

"He did; but I will not stand it! I give you warning, I won't stand it, Petronilla!" and I stamped, young bully that I was, until the dust sprang out of the boards, and the hounds by the distant hearth jumped up and whined. "No! not for all the base bishops in England!" I continued, taking a step this way and that. "He had better not do it again! If he does, I tell you it will be the worse for some one!"

"Francis," she exclaimed abruptly, "you must not speak in that way!"

But I was too angry to be silenced, though instinctively I changed my ground.

"Stephen Gardiner!" I cried furiously. "Who is Stephen Gardiner, I should like to know? He has no right to call himself Gardiner at all! Dr. Stephens he used to call himself, I have heard. A child with no name but his godfather's; that is what he is, for all his airs and his bishopric! Who is he to look on and see a Cludde beaten? If my uncle does not take care-"

"Francis!" she cried again, cutting me short ruthlessly. "Be silent, sir!" [and this time I was silent], "You unmanly boy," she continued, her face glowing with indignation, "to threaten my father before my face! How dare you, sir? How dare you? And who are you, you poor child," she exclaimed, with a startling change from invective to sarcasm-"who are you to talk of bishops, I should like to know?"

"One," I said sullenly, "who thinks less of cardinals and

bishops than some folk, Mistress Petronilla!"

"Ay, I know," she retorted scathingly-"I know that you are a kind of half-hearted Protestant-neither fish, flesh, nor fowl!"

"I am what my father made me!" I muttered.

"At any rate," she replied, "you do not see how small you are, or you would not talk of bishops. Heaven help us! That a boy who has done nothing and seen nothing, should talk of the Queen's Chancellor! Go! Go on, you foolish boy, and rule a country, or cut off heads, and then you may talk of such men-men who could unmake you and yours with a stroke of the pen! You, to talk so of Stephen Gardiner! Fie, fie, I say! For shame!"

I looked at her, dazed and bewildered, and had long afterward in my mind a picture of her as she stood above me, in the window bay, her back to the light, her slender figure drawn to its full height, her hand extended toward me. I could scarcely understand or believe that this was my gentle cousin. I turned without a word and stole away, not looking behind me. I was cowed.

It happened that the servants came hurrying in at the moment with a clatter of dishes and knives, and the noise covered my retreat. I had a fancy afterward that, as I moved away, Petronilla called to me. But at the time, what with the confusion and my own disorder, I paid no heed to her, but got myself blindly out of the hall, and away to my own attic.

It was a sharp lesson. But my feelings when, being alone, I had time to feel, need not be set down. After events made them of no moment, for I was even then on the verge of a change so

great that all the threats and misgivings, the fevers and agues, of that afternoon, real as they seemed at the time, became in a few hours as immaterial as the dew which fell before yesterday's thunderstorm.

The way the change began to come about was this. I crept in late to supper, facing the din and lights, the rows of guests and the hurrying servants, with a mixture of shame and sullenness. I was sitting down with a scowl next the Bishop's pages-my place was beside them, half-way down the table, and I was not too careful to keep my feet clear of their clothing-when my uncle's voice, raised in a harsher tone than was usual with him, even when he was displeased, summoned me.

"Come here, sirrah!" he cried roundly. "Come here, Master Francis! I have a word to speak to you!"

I went slowly, dragging my feet, while all looked up, and there was a partial silence. I was conscious of this, and it nerved me. For a moment indeed, as I stepped on to the dais I had a vision of scores of candles and rushlights floating in mist, and of innumerable bodiless faces all turned up to me. But the vision and the mistiness passed away, and left only my uncle's long, thin face inflamed with anger, and beside it, in the same ring of light, the watchful eyes and stern, impassive features of Stephen Gardiner. The Bishop's face and his eyes were all I saw then; the same face, the same eyes, I remembered, which had looked unyielding into those of the relentless Cromwell and had scarce dropped before the frown of a Tudor. His purple cap and cassock, the lace and

rich fur, the chain of office, I remembered afterward.

"Now, boy," thundered Sir Anthony, pointing out the place where I should stand, "what have you to say for yourself? why have you so misbehaved this afternoon? Let your tongue speak quickly, do you hear, or you will smart for it. And let it be to the purpose, boy!"

I was about to answer something-whether it was likely to make things worse or better, I cannot remember-when Gardiner stayed me. He laid his hand gently on Sir Anthony's sleeve, and interposed. "One moment," he said mildly, "your nephew did not stay for the Church's blessing, I remember. Perhaps he has scruples. There are people nowadays who have. Let us hear if it be so."

This time it was Sir Anthony who did not let me answer.

"No, no," he cried hastily; "no, no; it is not so. He conforms, my lord, he conforms. You conform, sir," he continued, turning fiercely upon me, "do you not? Answer, sir."

"Ah!" the Bishop put in with a sneer, "you conform, do you?"

"I attend mass-to please my uncle," I replied boldly.

"He was ill brought up as a child," Sir Anthony said hastily, speaking in a tone which those below could not hear. "But you know all that, my lord-you know all that. It is an old story to you. So I make, and I pray you to make for the sake of the house, some allowance. He conforms; he undoubtedly conforms."

"Enough!" Gardiner assented. "The rest is for the good priest here, whose ministrations will no doubt in time avail. But a word

with this young gentleman, Sir Anthony, on another subject. If it was not to the holy office he objected, perhaps it was to the Queen's Chancellor, or to the Queen?" He raised his voice with the last words and bent his brows, so that I could scarcely believe it was the same man speaking. "Eh, sir, was that so?" he continued severely, putting aside Sir Anthony's remonstrance and glowering at me. "It may be that we have a rebel here instead of a heretic."

"God forbid!" cried the knight, unable to contain himself. It was clear that he repented already of his ill-timed discipline. "I will answer for it that we have no Wyatts here, my lord."

"That is well!" the Chancellor replied. "That is well!" he repeated, his eyes leaving me and roving the hall with so proud a menace in their glance that all quailed, even the fool. "That is very well," he said, drumming on the table with his fingers; "but let Master Francis speak for himself."

"I never heard," said I boldly-I had had a moment for thought-"that Sir Thomas Wyatt had any following in this country. None to my knowledge. As for the Queen's marriage with the Prince of Spain, which was the ground, as we gathered here, of Wyatt's rising with the Kentish folk, it seems a matter rather for the Queen's grace than her subjects. But if that be not so, I, for my part, would rather have seen her married to a stout Englishman-ay, or to a Frenchman."

"And why, young gentleman?"

"Because I would we kept at peace with France. We have

more to gain by fighting Spain than fighting France," I answered bluntly.

My uncle held up his hands. "The boy is clean mad!" he groaned. "Who ever heard of such a thing? With all France, the rightful estate of her Majesty, waiting to be won back, he talks of fighting Spain! And his own grandmother was a Spaniard!"

"I am none the less an Englishman for that!" I said; whereon there was a slight murmur of applause in the hall below. "And for France," I continued, carried away by this, "we have been fighting it, off and on, as long as men remember; and what are we the better? We have only lost what we had to begin. Besides, I am told that France is five times stronger than it was in Henry the Fifth's time, and we should only spend our strength in winning what we could not hold. While as to Spain—"

"Ay, as to Spain?" grumbled Sir Anthony, forgetting his formidable neighbor, and staring at me with eyes of wonder. "Why, my father fought the French at Guinegate, and my grandfather at Cherbourg, and his father at Agincourt! But there! As to Spain, you popinjay?"

"Why, she is conquering here," I answered warmly, "and colonizing there among the newly-discovered countries of the world, and getting all the trade and all the seaports and all the gold and silver; and Spain after all is a nation with no greater strength of men than England. Ay, and I hear," I cried, growing more excited and raising my voice, "that now is our time or never! The Spaniards and the Portuguese have discovered a new world

over seas.

"A Castilla y á Leon
Nuevo mundo dió Coton!

say they; but depend upon it, every country that is to be rich and strong in the time that is coming must have part in it. We cannot conquer either Spain or France; we have not men enough. But we have docks and sailors, and ships in London and Fowey, and Bristol and the Cinque Ports, enough to fight Spain over the great seas, and I say, 'Have at her!'"

"What next?" groaned Sir Anthony piteously. "Did man ever hear such crackbrained nonsense?"

But I think it was not nonsense, for his words were almost lost in the cry which ran through the hall as I ceased speaking—a cry of English voices. One moment my heart beat high and proudly with a new sense of power; the next, as a shadow of a cloud falls on a sunny hillside, the cold sneer on the statesman's face fell on me and chilled me. His set look had neither thawed nor altered, his color had neither come nor gone. "You speak your lesson well, lad," he said. "Who taught you statecraft?"

I grew smaller, shrinking with each word he uttered; and faltered, and was dumb.

"Come," he said, "you see but a little way; yet country lads do not talk of Fowey and Bristol! Who primed you?"

"I met a Master Sebastian Cabot," I said reluctantly at last,

when he had pressed me more than once, "who stayed a while at a house not far from here, and had been Inspector of the Navy to King Edward. He had been a seaman seventy years, and he talked-"

"Too fast!" said Gardiner, with a curt nod. "But enough, I understand. I know the man. He is dead."

He was silent then, and seemed to have fallen suddenly into thought, as a man well might who had the governing of a kingdom on his shoulders.

Seemingly he had done with me. I looked at Sir Anthony. "Ay, go!" he said irritably, waving me off. "Go!"

And I went. The ordeal was over, and over so successfully that I felt the humiliation of the afternoon cheap at the price of this triumph; for, as I stepped down, there was a buzz around me, a murmur of congratulation and pride and excitement. On every Coton face I marked a flush, in every Coton eye I read a sparkle, and every flush and every sparkle was for me. Even the Chancellor's secretaries, grave, down-looking men, all secrecy and caution, cast curious glances at me, as though I were something out of the common; and the Chancellor's pages made way for me with new-born deference. "There is for country wits!" I heard Baldwin Moor cry gleefully, while the man who put food before me murmured of "the Cludde bull-pup!" If I read in Father Carey's face, as indeed I did, solicitude as well as relief and gladness, I marked the latter only, and hugged a natural pride to my breast. When Martin Luther said boldly that it was not

only Bishop could fill a bowl, it was by an effort I refrained from joining in the laugh which followed.

For an hour I enjoyed this triumph, and did all but brag of it. Especially I wished Petronilla had witnessed it. At the end of that time-*Finis*, as the book says. I was crossing the courtyard, one-half of which was bathed in a cold splendor of moonlight, and was feeling the first sobering touch of the night air on my brow, when I heard some one call out my name. I turned, to find one of the Chancellor's servants, a sleek, substantial fellow, with a smug mouth, at my elbow.

"What is it?" I said.

"I am bidden to fetch you at once, Master Cludde," he answered, a gleam of sly malice peeping through the gravity of his demeanor. "The Chancellor would see you in his room, young sir."

CHAPTER II

IN THE BISHOP'S ROOM

Chancellor was lodged in the great chamber on the southern side of the courtyard, a room which we called the Tapestryed Chamber, and in which tradition said that King Henry the Sixth had once slept. It was on the upper floor, and for this reason free from the damp air which in autumn and winter rose from the moat and hung about the lower range of rooms. It was besides, of easy access from the hall, a door in the gallery of the latter leading into an anteroom, which again opened into the Tapestryed Chamber; while a winding staircase, starting from a dark nook in the main passage of the house, also led to this state apartment, but by another and more private door.

I reached the antechamber with a stout heart in my breast, though a little sobered by my summons, and feeling such a reaction from the heat of a few minutes before as follows a plunge into cold water. In the anteroom I was bidden to wait while the great man's will was taken, which seemed strange to me, then unused to the mummerly of Court folk. But before I had time to feel much surprise, the inner door was opened, and I was told to enter.

The great room, which I had seldom seen in use, had now an appearance quite new to me. A dull red fire was glowing

comfortably on the hearthstone, before which a posset stool was standing. Near this, seated at a table strewn with a profusion of papers and documents, was a secretary writing busily. The great oaken bedstead, with its nodding tester, lay in a background of shadows, which played about the figures broidered on the hangings, or were lost in the darkness of the corners; while near the fire, in the light cast by the sconces fixed above the hearth, lay part of the Chancellor's equipment. The fur rugs and cloak of sable, the saddle-bags, the dispatch-boxes, and the silver chafing-dish, gave an air of comfort to this part of the room. Walking up and down in the midst of these, dictating a sentence at every other turn, was Stephen Gardiner.

As I entered the clerk looked up, holding his pen suspended. His master, by a quick nod, ordered him to proceed. Then, signaling to me in a like silent fashion his command that I should stand by the hearth, the Bishop resumed his task of composition.

For some minutes my interest in the man, whom I had now an opportunity of scrutinizing unmarked and at my leisure, took up all my attention. He was at this time close on seventy, but looked, being still tall and stout, full ten years younger. His face, square and sallow, was indeed wrinkled and lined; his eyes lay deep in his head, his shoulders were beginning to bend, the nape of his neck to become prominent. He had lost an inch of his full height. But his eyes still shone brightly, nor did any trace of weakness mar the stern character of his mouth, or the crafty wisdom of his brow. The face was the face of a man austere, determined,

perhaps cruel; of a man who could both think and act.

My curiosity somewhat satisfied, I had leisure, first to wonder why I had been sent for, and then to admire the prodigious number of books and papers which lay about, more, indeed, than I had ever seen together in my life. From this I passed to listening, idly at first, and with interest afterward, to the letter which the Chancellor was dictating. It seemed from its tenor to be a letter to some person in authority, and presently one passage attracted my attention, so that I could afterward recall it word for word.

"I do not think" – the Chancellor pronounced, speaking in a sonorous voice, and the measured tone of one whose thoughts lie perfectly arranged in his head—"that the Duchess Katherine will venture to take the step suggested as possible. Yet Clarence's report may be of moment. Let the house, therefore, be watched if anything savoring of flight be marked, and take notice whether there be a vessel in the Pool adapted to her purpose. A vessel trading to Dunquerque would be most likely. Leave her husband till I return, when I will deal with him roundly."

I missed what followed. It was upon another subject, and my thoughts lagged behind, being wholly taken up with the Duchess Katherine and her fortunes. I wondered who she was, young or old, and what this step could be she was said to meditate, and what the jargon about the Pool and Dunquerque meant. I was still thinking of this when I was aroused by an abrupt silence, and looking up found that the Chancellor was bending over the papers on the table. The secretary was leaving the room.

As the door closed behind him, Gardiner rose from his stooping posture and came slowly toward me, a roll of papers in his hand. "Now," he said tranquilly, seating himself in an elbow-chair which stood in front of the hearth, "I will dispose of your business, Master Cludde."

He paused, looking at me in a shrewd, masterful way, much as if-I thought at the time, little knowing how near the truth my fancy went-I were a beast he was about to buy; and then he went on. "I have sent for you, Master Francis," he said dryly, fixing his piercing eyes on mine, "because I think that this country does not suit your health. You conform, but you conform with a bad grace, and England is no longer the place for such. You incite the commonalty against the Queen's allies, and England is not the place for such. Do not contradict me; I have heard you myself. Then," he continued, grimly thrusting out his jaw in a sour smile, "you misname those whom the Queen honors; and were Dr. Stephens-you take me, Master Malapert? such a man as his predecessors, you would rue the word. For a trifle scarce weightier Wolsey threw a man to rot six years in a dungeon, boy!"

I changed color, yet not so much in fear-though it were vain to say I did not tremble-as in confusion. I had called him Dr. Stephens indeed, but it had been to Petronilla only. I stood, not knowing what to say, until he, after lingering on his last words to enjoy my misery, resumed his subject. "That is one good and sufficient reason-mind you, sufficient, boy-why England is no place for you. For another, the Cluddes have always been

soldiers; and you-though readier-witted than some, which comes of your Spanish grandmother-are quicker with a word than a thought, and a blow than either. Of which afterward. Well, England is going to be no place for soldiers. Please God, we have finished with wars at home. A woman's reign should be a reign of peace."

I hardened my heart at that. A reign of peace, forsooth, when the week before we had heard of a bishop burned at Gloucester! I hardened my heart. I would not be frightened, though I knew his power, and knew how men in those days misused power. I would put a bold face on the matter.

He had not done with me yet, however. "One more reason I have," he continued, stopping me as I was about to speak, "for saying that England will not suit your health, Master Cludde. It is that I do not want you here. Abroad, you may be of use to me, and at the same time carve out your own fortune. You have courage and can use a sword, I hear. You understand-and it is a rare gift with Englishmen-some Spanish, which I suppose your father or your uncle taught you. You can-so Father Carey says-construe a Latin sentence if it be not too difficult. You are scarcely twenty, and you will have me for your patron. Why, were I you, boy, with your age and your chances, I would die Prince or Pope! Ay, I would!" He stopped speaking, his eyes on fire. Nay, a ring of such real feeling flashed out in his last words that, though I distrusted him, though old prejudices warned me against him, and, at heart a Protestant, I shuddered at things I had heard of

him, the longing to see the world and have adventures seized upon me. Yet I did not speak at once. He had told me that my tongue outran my thoughts, and I stood silent until he asked me curtly, "Well, sirrah, what do you say?"

"I say, my Lord Bishop," I replied respectfully, "that the prospect you hold out to me would tempt me were I a younger son, or without those ties of gratitude which hold me to my uncle. But, my father excepted, I am Sir Anthony's only heir."

"Ah, your father!" he said contemptuously. "You do well to remind me of him, for I see you are forgetting the first part of my speech in thinking of the last! Should I have promised first and threatened later? You would fain, I expect, stay here and woo Mistress Petronilla? Do I touch you there? You think to marry the maid and be master of Coton End in God's good time, do you? Then listen, Francis Cludde. Neither one nor the other, neither maid nor meadow will be yours should you stay here till Doomsday!"

I started, and stood glowering on him, speechless with anger and astonishment.

"You do not know who you are," he continued, leaning forward with a sudden movement, and speaking with one claw-like finger extended, and a malevolent gleam in his eyes. "You called me a nameless child a while ago, and so I was; yet have I risen to be ruler of England, Master Cludde! But you-I will tell you which of us is base-born. I will tell you who and what your father, Ferdinand Cludde, was. He was, nay, he is, my tool, spy,

jackal! Do you understand, boy? Your father is one of the band of foul creatures to whom such as I, base-born though I be, fling the scraps from their table! He is the vilest of the vile men who do my dirty work, my lad."

He had raised his voice and hand in passion, real or assumed. He dropped them as I sprang forward. "You lie!" I cried, trembling all over.

"Easy! easy!" he said. He stopped me where I was by a gesture of stern command. "Think!" he continued, calmly and weightily. "Has any one ever spoken to you of your father since the day seven years ago, when you came here, a child, brought by a servant? Has Sir Anthony talked of him? Has any servant named his name to you. Think, boy. If Ferdinand Cludde be a father to be proud of, why does his brother make naught of him?"

"He is a Protestant," I said faintly. Faintly, because I had asked myself this very question not once but often. Sir Anthony so seldom mentioned my father that I had thought it strange myself. I had thought it strange, too, that the servants, who must well remember Ferdinand Cludde, never talked to me about him. Hitherto I had always been satisfied to answer, "He is a Protestant"; but face to face with this terrible old man and his pitiless charge, the words came but faintly from my lips.

"A Protestant," he replied solemnly. "Yes, this comes of schism, that villains cloak themselves in it, and parade for true men. A Protestant you call him, boy? He has been that, ay, and all things to all men; and he has betrayed all things and all men. He

was in the great Cardinal's confidence, and forsook him, when he fell, for Cromwell. Thomas Cromwell, although they were of the same persuasion, he betrayed to me. I have here, here" – and he struck the letters in his hand a scornful blow—"the offer he made to me, and his terms. Then eight years back, when the late King Edward came to the throne, I too fell on evil days, and Master Cludde abandoned me for my Lord Hertford, but did me no great harm. But he did something which blasted him—blasted him at last."

He paused. Had the fire died down, or was it only my imagination that the shadows thickened round the bed behind him, and closed in more nearly on us, leaving his pale grim face to confront me—his face, which seemed the paler and grimmer, the more saturnine and all-mastering, for the dark frame which set it off?

"He did this," he continued slowly, "which came to light and blasted him. He asked, as the price of his service in betraying me, his brother's estate."

"Impossible!" I stammered. "Why, Sir Anthony—"

"What of Sir Anthony, you would ask?" the Chancellor replied, interrupting me with savage irony. "Oh, he was a Papist! an obstinate Papist! He might go hang—or to Warwick Jail!"

"Nay, but this at least, my lord, is false!" I cried. "Palpably false! If my father had so betrayed his own flesh and blood, should I be here? Should I be at Coton End? You say this happened eight years ago. Seven years ago I came here. Would

Sir Anthony-"

"There are fools everywhere," the old man sneered. "When my Lord Hertford refused your father's suit, Ferdinand began-it is his nature-to plot against him. He was found out, and execrated by all-for he had been false to all-he fled for his life. He left you behind, and a servant brought you to Coton End, where Sir Anthony took you in."

I covered my face. Alas! I believed him; I, who had always been so proud of my lineage, so proud of the brave traditions of the house and its honor, so proud of Coton End and all that belonged to it! Now, if this were true, I could never again take pleasure in one or the other. I was the son of a man branded as a turncoat and an informer, of one who was the worst of traitors! I sank down on the settle behind me and hid my face. Another might have thought less of the blow, or, with greater knowledge of the world, might have made light of it as a thing not touching himself. But on me, young as I was, and proud, and as yet tender, and having done nothing myself, it fell with crushing force.

It was years since I had seen my father, and I could not stand forth loyally and fight his battle, as a son his father's friend and familiar for years might have fought it. On the contrary, there was so much which seemed mysterious in my past life, so much that bore out the Chancellor's accusation, that I felt a dread of its truth even before I had proof. Yet I would have proof. "Show me the letters!" I said harshly; "show me the letters, my lord!"

"You know your father's handwriting?"

"I do."

I knew it, not from any correspondence my father had held with me, but because I had more than once examined with natural curiosity the wrappers of the dispatches which at intervals of many months, sometimes of a year, came from him to Sir Anthony. I had never known anything of the contents of the letters, all that fell to my share being certain formal messages, which Sir Anthony would give me, generally with a clouded brow and a testy manner that grew genial again only with the lapse of time.

Gardiner handed me the letters, and I took them and read one. One was enough. That my father! Alas! alas! No wonder that I turned my face to the wall, shivering as with the ague, and that all about me—except the red glow of the fire, which burned into my brain—seemed darkness! I had lost the thing I valued most. I had lost at a blow everything of which I was proud. The treachery that could flush that worn face opposite to me, lined as it was with statecraft, and betray the wily tongue into passion, seemed to me, young and impulsive, a thing so vile as to brand a man's children through generations.

Therefore I hid my face in the corner of the settle, while the Chancellor gazed at me a while in silence, as one who had made an experiment might watch the result.

"You see now, my friend," he said at last, almost gently, "that you may be base-born in more ways than one. But be of good cheer; you are young, and what I have done you may do.

Think of Thomas Cromwell-his father was naught. Think of the old Cardinal-my master. Think of the Duke of Suffolk-Charles Brandon, I mean. He was a plain gentleman, yet he married a queen. More, the door which they had to open for themselves I will open for you-only, when you are inside, play the man, and be faithful."

"What would you have me do?" I whispered hoarsely.

"I would have you do this," he answered. "There are great things brewing in the Netherlands, boy-great changes, unless I am mistaken. I have need of an agent there, a man, stout, trusty, and, in particular, unknown, who will keep me informed of events. If you will be that agent, I can procure for you-and not appear in the matter myself-a post of pay and honor in the Regent's Guards. What say you to that, Master Cludde? A few weeks and you will be making history, and Coton End will seem a mean place to you. Now, what do you say?"

I was longing to be away and alone with my misery, but I forced myself to reply patiently.

"With your leave I will give you my answer to-morrow, my lord," I said, as steadily as I could; and I rose, still keeping my face turned from him.

"Very well," he replied, with apparent confidence. But he watched me keenly, as I fancied. "I know already what your answer will be. Yet before you go I will give you a piece of advice which in the new life you begin to-night will avail you more than silver, more than gold-ay, more than steel, Master Francis. It is

this: Be prompt to think, be prompt to strike, be slow to speak! Mark it well! It is a simple recipe, yet it has made me what I am, and may make you greater. Now go!"

He pointed to the little door opening on the staircase, and I bowed and went out, closing it carefully behind me. On the stairs, moving blindly in the dark, I fell over some one who lay sleeping there, and who clutched at my leg. I shook him off, however, with an exclamation of rage, and, stumbling down the rest of the steps, gained the open air. Excited and feverish, I shrank with aversion from the confinement of my room, and, hurrying over the drawbridge, sought at random the long terrace by the fish-pools, on which the moonlight fell, a sheet of silver, broken only by the sundial and the shadows of the rose bushes. The night air, weeping chill from the forest, fanned my cheeks as I paced up and down. One way I had before me the manor-house-the steep gable-ends, the gateway tower, the low outbuildings and cornstacks and stables-and flanking these the squat tower and nave of the church. I turned. Now I saw only the water and the dark line of trees which fringed the further bank. But above these the stars were shining.

Yet in my mind there was no starlight. There all was a blur of wild passions and resolves. Shame and an angry resentment against those who had kept me so long in ignorance-even against Sir Anthony-were my uppermost feelings. I smarted under the thought that I had been living on his charity. I remembered many a time when I had taken much on myself, and he had smiled,

and the remembrance stung me. I longed to assert myself and do something to wipe off the stain.

But should I accept the Bishop's offer? It never crossed my mind to do so. He had humiliated me, and I hated him for it. Longing to cut myself off from my old life, I could not support a patron who would know, and might cast in my teeth the old shame. A third reason, too, worked powerfully with me as I became cooler. This was the conviction that, apart from the glitter which the old man's craft had cast about it, the part he would have me play was that of a spy-an informer! A creature like-I dared not say like my father, yet I had him in my mind. And from this, from the barest suspicion of this, I shrank as the burned puppy from the fire-shrank with fierce twitching of nerve and sinew.

Yet if I would not accept his offer it was clear I must fend for myself. His threats meant as much as that, and I smiled sternly as I found necessity at one with inclination. I would leave Coton End at once, and henceforth I would fight for my own hand. I would have no name until I had made for myself a new one.

This resolve formed, I turned and went back to the house, and felt my way to my own chamber. The moonlight poured through the lattice and fell white on my pallet. I crossed the room and stood still. Down the middle of the coverlet-or my eyes deceived me-lay a dark line.

I stooped mechanically to see what this was and found my own sword lying there; the sword which Sir Anthony had given

me on my last birthday. But how had it come there? As I took it up something soft and light brushed my hand and drooped from the hilt. Then I remembered. A week before I had begged Petronilla to make me a sword-knot of blue velvet for use on state occasions. No doubt she had done it, and had brought the sword back this evening, and laid it there in token of peace.

I sat down on my bed, and softer and kindlier thoughts came to me; thoughts of love and gratitude, in which the old man who had been a second father to me had part. I would go as I had resolved, but I would return to them when I had done a thing worth doing; something which should efface the brand that lay on me now.

With gentle fingers I disengaged the velvet knot and thrust it into my bosom. Then I tied about the hilt the old leather thong, and began to make my preparations; considering this or that route while I hunted for my dagger and changed my doublet and hose for stouter raiment and long, untanned boots. I was yet in the midst of this, when a knock at the door startled me.

"Who is there?" I asked, standing erect.

For answer Martin Luther slid in, closing the door behind him. The fool did not speak, but turning his eyes first on one thing and then on another nodded sagely.

"Well?" I growled.

"You are off, master," he said, nodding again. "I thought so."

"Why did you think so?" I retorted impatiently.

"It is time for the young birds to fly when the cuckoo begins

to stir," he answered.

I understood him dimly and in part. "You have been listening," I said wrathfully, my cheeks burning.

"And been kicked in the face like a fool for my pains," he answered. "Ah, well, it is better to be kicked by the boot you love than kissed by the lips you hate. But Master Francis, Master Francis!" he continued in a whisper.

He said no more, and I looked up. The man was stooping slightly forward, his pale face thrust out. There was a strange gleam in his eyes, and his teeth grinned in the moonlight. Thrice he drew his finger across his lean knotted throat. "Shall I?" he hissed, his hot breath reaching me, "shall I?"

I recoiled from him shuddering. It was a ghastly pantomime, and it seemed to me that I saw madness in his eyes.

"In Heaven's name, no!" I cried-"No! Do you hear, Martin? No!"

He stood back on the instant, as a dog might have done being reprov'd. But I could hardly finish in comfort after that with him standing there, although when I next turned to him he seemed half asleep and his eyes were dull and fishy as ever.

"One thing you can do," I said brusquely. Then I hesitated, looking round me. I wished to send something to Petronilla, some word, some keepsake. But I had nothing that would serve a maid's purpose, and could think of nothing until my eye lit on a house-martin's nest, lying where I had cast it on the window-sill. I had taken it down that morning because the droppings during

the last summer had fallen on the lead work, and I would not have it used when the swallows returned. It was but a bit of clay, and yet it would serve. She would guess its meaning.

I gave it into his hands. "Take this," I said, "and give it privately to Mistress Petronilla. Privately, you understand. And say nothing to any one, or the Bishop will flay your back, Martin."

CHAPTER III

"DOWN WITH PURVEYORS!"

The first streak of daylight found me already footing it through the forest by paths known to few save the woodcutters, but with which many a boyish exploration had made me familiar. From Coton End the London road lies plain and fair through Stratford-on-Avon and Oxford. But my plan, the better to evade pursuit, was, instead, to cross the forest in a northeasterly direction, and, passing by Warwick, to strike the great north road between Coventry and Daventry, which, running thence southeastward, would take me as straight as a bird might fly through Dunstable, St. Albans, and Barnet, to London. My baggage consisted only of my cloak, sword, and dagger; and for money I had but a gold angel, and a few silver bits of doubtful value. But I trusted that this store, slender as it was, would meet my charges as far as London. Once there I must depend on my wits either for providence at home or a passage abroad.

Striding steadily up and down hill, for Arden Forest is made up of hills and dells which follow one another as do the wave and trough of the sea, only less regularly, I made my way toward Wootton Wawen. As soon as I espied its battlemented church lying in a wooded bottom below me, I kept a more easterly course, and, leaving Henley-in-Arden far to the left, passed down

toward Leek Wootton. The damp, dead bracken underfoot, the leafless oaks and gray sky overhead, nay the very cry of the bittern fishing in the bottoms, seemed to be at one with my thoughts; for these were dreary and sad enough.

But hope and a fixed aim form no bad makeshifts for happiness. Striking the broad London road as I had purposed I slept that night at Ryton Dunsmoor, and the next at Towcester; and the third day, which rose bright and frosty, found me stepping gayly southward, travel-stained indeed, but dry and whole. My spirits rose with the temperature. For a time I put the past behind me, and found amusement in the sights of the road; in the heavy wagons and long trains of pack-horses, and the cheery greetings which met me with each mile. After all, I had youth and strength, and the world before me; and particularly Stony Stratford, where I meant to dine.

There was one trouble common among wayfarers which did not touch me; and that was the fear of robbers, for he would be a sturdy beggar who would rob an armed foot-passenger for the sake of an angel; and the groats were gone. So I felt no terrors on that account, and even when about noon I heard a horseman trot up behind me, and rein in his horse so as to keep pace with me at a walk, step for step—a thing which might have seemed suspicious to some—I took no heed of him. I was engaged with my first view of Stratford, and did not turn my head. We had walked on so for fifty paces or more, before it struck me as odd that the man did not pass me.

Then I turned, and shading my eyes from the sun, which stood just over his shoulder, said, "Good-day, friend."

"Good-day, master," he answered.

He was a stout fellow, looking like a citizen, although he had a sword by his side, and wore it with an air of importance which the sunshine of opportunity might have ripened into a swagger. His dress was plain; and he sat a good hackney as a miller's sack might have sat it. His face was the last thing I looked at. When I raised my eyes to it, I got an unpleasant start. The man was no stranger. I knew him in a moment for the messenger who had summoned me to the Chancellor's presence.

The remembrance did not please me; and reading in the fellow's sly look that he recognized me, and thought he had made a happy discovery on finding me, I halted abruptly. He did the same.

"It is a fine morning," he said, taken aback by my sudden movement, but affecting an indifference which the sparkle in his eye belied. "A rare day for the time of year."

"It is," I answered, gazing steadily at him.

"Going to London? Or may be only to Stratford?" he hazarded. He fidgeted uncomfortably under my eye, but still pretended ignorance of me.

"That is as may be," I answered.

"No offense, I am sure," he said.

I cast a quick glance up and down the road. There happened to be no one in sight. "Look here!" I replied, stepping forward to

lay my hand on the horse's shoulder-but the man reined back and prevented me, thereby giving me a clew to his character-"you are in the service of the Bishop of Winchester?"

His face fell, and he could not conceal his disappointment at being recognized. "Well, master," he answered reluctantly, "perhaps I am, and perhaps I am not."

"That is enough," I said shortly. "And you know me. You need not lie about it, man, for I can see you do. Now, look here, Master Steward, or whatever your name may be--"

"It is Master Pritchard," he put in sulkily; "and I am not ashamed of it."

"Very well. Then let us understand one another. Do you mean to interfere with me?"

He grinned. "Well, to be plain, I do," he replied, reining his horse back another step. "I have orders to look out for you, and have you stopped if I find you. And I must do my duty, sir; I am sworn to it, Master Cludde."

"Right," said I calmly; "and I must do mine, which is to take care of my skin." And I drew my sword and advanced upon him with a flourish. "We will soon decide this little matter," I added grimly, one eye on him and one on the empty road, "if you will be good enough to defend yourself."

But there was no fight in the fellow. By good luck, too, he was so startled that he did not do what he might have done with safety; namely, retreat, and keep me in sight until some passers-by came up. He did give back, indeed, but it was against the bank.

"Have a care," he cried in a fume, his eye following my sword nervously; he did not try to draw his own. "There is no call for fighting, I say."

"But I say there is," I replied bluntly. "Call and cause! Either you fight me, or I go where I please."

"You may go to Bath for me!" he spluttered, his face the color of a turkey-cock's wattles with rage.

"Do you mean it, my friend?" I said, and I played my point about his leg, half-minded to give him a little prod by way of earnest. "Make up your mind."

"Yes!" he shrieked out, suspecting my purpose, and bouncing about in his saddle like a parched pea. "Yes, I say!" he roared. "Do you hear me? You go your way, and I will go mine."

"That is a bargain," I said quietly; "and mind you keep to it."

I put up my sword with my face turned from him, lest he should see the curl of my lip and the light in my eyes. In truth, I was uncommonly well pleased with myself, and was thinking that if I came through all my adventures as well, I should do merrily. Outwardly, however, I tried to ignore my victory, and to make things as easy as I could for my friend-if one may call a man who will not fight him a friend, a thing I doubt. "Which way are you going?" I asked amicably; "to Stratford?"

He nodded, for he was too sulky to speak.

"All right!" I said cheerfully, feeling that my dignity could take care of itself now. "Then so far we may go together. Only do you remember the terms. After dinner each goes his own way."

He nodded again, and we turned, and went on in silence, eying one another askance, like two ill-matched dogs coupled together. But, luckily, our forced companionship did not last long, a quarter of a mile and a bend in the road bringing us to the first low, gray houses of Stratford; a long, straggling village it seemed, made up of inns strewn along the road, like beads threaded on a rosary. And to be sure, to complete the likeness, we came presently upon an ancient stone cross standing on the green. I pulled up in front of this with a sigh of pleasure, for on either side of it, one facing the other, was an inn of the better class.

"Well," I said, "which shall it be? The Rose and Crown, or the Crown without the Rose?"

"Choose for yourself," he answered churlishly. "I go to the other."

I shrugged my shoulders. After all, you cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, and if a man has not courage he is not likely to have good-fellowship. But the words angered me, nevertheless, for a shabby, hulking fellow lounging at my elbow overheard them and grinned; a hiccoughing, blear-eyed man he was as I had ever met, with a red nose and the rags of a tattered cassock about him. I turned away in annoyance, and chose the "Crown" at hazard; and pushing my way through a knot of horses that stood tethered at the door, went in, leaving the two to their devices.

I found a roaring fire in the great room, and three or four

yeomen standing about it, drinking ale. But I was hot from walking, so, after saluting them and ordering my meal, I went and sat for choice on a bench by the window away from the fire. The window was one of a kind common in Warwickshire houses; long and low and beetle-browed, the story above projecting over it. I sat here a minute looking idly out at the inn opposite, a heavy stone building with a walled courtyard attached to it; such an inn as was common enough about the time of the Wars of the Roses when wayfarers looked rather for safety than comfort. Presently I saw a boy come out of it and start up the road at a run. Then, a minute later, the ragged fellow I had seen on the green came out and lurched across the road. He seemed to be making, though uncertainly, for my inn, and, sure enough, just as my bread and bacon-the latter hot and hissing-were put before me, he staggered into the room, bringing a strong smell of ale and onions with him. "*Pax vobiscum!*" he said, leering at me with tipsy solemnity.

I guessed what he was-a monk, one of those unfortunates still to be found here and there up and down the country, whom King Henry, when he put down the monasteries, had made homeless. I did not look on the class with much favor, thinking that for most of them the cloister, even if the Queen should succeed in setting the abbeys on their legs again, would have few attractions. But I saw that the simple farmers received his scrap of Latin with respect, and I nodded civilly as I went on with my meal.

I was not to get off so easily, however. He came and planted himself opposite to me.

"*Pax vobiscum*, my son," he repeated. "The ale is cheap here, and good."

"So is the ham, good father," I replied cheerfully, not pausing in my attack on the victuals. "I will answer for so much."

"Well, well," the knave replied with ready wit, "I breakfasted early. I am content. Landlord, another plate and a full tankard. The young gentleman would have me dine with him."

I could not tell whether to be angry or to laugh at his impudence.

"The gentleman says he will answer for it!" repeated the rascal, with a twinkle in his eye, as the landlord hesitated. He was by no means so drunk as he looked.

"No, no, father," I cried, joining in the general laugh into which the farmers by the fire broke. "A cup of ale is in reason, and for that I will pay, but for no more. Drink it, and wish me Godspeed."

"I will do more than that, lad," he answered. Swaying to and fro my cup, which he had seized in his grasp, he laid his hand on the window-ledge beside me, as though to steady himself, and stooped until his coarse, puffy face was but a few inches from mine. "More than that," he whispered hoarsely; and his eyes, peering into mine, were now sober and full of meaning. "If you do not want to be put in the stocks or worse, make tracks! Make tracks, lad!" he continued. "Your friend over there—he is a niggardly oaf—has sent for the hundredman and the constable, and you are the quarry. So the word is, Go! That," he added aloud,

standing erect again, with a drunken smile, "is for your cup of ale; and good coin too!"

For half a minute I sat quite still; taken aback, and wondering, while the bacon cooled on the plate before me, what I was to do. I did not doubt the monk was telling the truth. Why should he lie to me? And I cursed my folly in trusting to a coward's honor or a serving-man's good faith. But lamentations were useless. What was I to do? I had no horse, and no means of getting one. I was in a strange country, and to try to escape on foot from pursuers who knew the roads, and had the law on their side, would be a hopeless undertaking. Yet to be haled back to Coton End a prisoner-I could not face that. Mechanically I raised a morsel of bacon to my lips, and as I did so, a thought occurred to me-an idea suggested by some talk I had heard the evening before at Towcester.

Fanciful as the plan was, I snatched at it; and knowing each instant to be precious, took my courage in my hand-and my tankard. "Here," I cried, speaking suddenly and loudly, "here is bad luck to purveyors, Master Host!"

There were a couple of stablemen within hearing, lounging in the doorway, besides the landlord and his wife and the farmers. A villager or two also had dropped in, and there were two peddlers lying half asleep in the corner. All these pricked up their ears more or less at my words. But, like most country folk, they were slow to take in anything new or unexpected; and I had to drink afresh and say again, "Here is bad luck to purveyors!" before any

one took it up.

Then the landlord showed he understood.

"Ay, so say I!" he cried, with an oath. "Purveyors, indeed! It is such as they give the Queen a bad name."

"God bless her!" quoth the monk loyally.

"And drown the purveyors!" a farmer exclaimed.

"They were here a year ago, and left us as bare as a shorn sheep," struck in a strapping villager, speaking at a white heat, but telling me no news; for this was what I had heard at Towcester the night before. "The Queen should lie warm if she uses all the wool they took! And the pack-horses they purveyed to carry off the plunder-why, the packmen avoid Stratford ever since as though we had the Black Death! Oh, down with the purveyors, say I! The first that comes this way I will show the bottom of the Ouse. Ay, that I will, though I hang for it!"

"Easy! easy, Tom Miller!" the host interposed, affecting an air of assurance, even while he cast an eye of trouble at his fitches. "It will be another ten years before they harry us again. There is Potter's Pury! They never took a tester's worth from Potter's Pury! No, nor from Preston Gobion! But they will go to them next, depend upon it!"

"I hope they will," I said, with a world of gloomy insinuation in my words. "But I doubt it!"

And this time my hint was not wasted. The landlord changed color. "What are you driving at, master?" he asked mildly, while the others looked at me in silence and waited for more.

"What if there be one across the road now!" I said, giving way to the temptation, and speaking falsely-for which I paid dearly afterward. "A purveyor, I mean, unless I am mistaken in him, or he tells lies. He has come straight from the Chancellor, white wand, warrant, and all. He is taking his dinner now, but he has sent for the hundredman, so I guess he means business."

"For the hundredman?" repeated the landlord, his brows meeting.

"Yes; unless I am mistaken."

There was silence for a moment. Then the man they called Tom Miller dashed his cap on the floor and, folding his arms defiantly, looked round on his neighbors. "He has come, has he!" he roared, his face swollen, his eyes bloodshot. "Then I will be as good as my word! Who will help? Shall we sit down and be shorn like sheep, as we were before, so that our children lay on the bare stones, and we pulled the plow ourselves? Or shall we show that we are free Englishmen, and not slaves of Frenchmen? Shall we teach Master Purveyor not to trouble us again? Now, what say you, neighbors?"

So fierce a growl of impatience and anger rose round me as at once answered the question. A dozen red faces glared at me and at one another, and from the very motion and passion of the men as they snarled and threatened, the room seemed twice as full as it was. Their oaths and cries of encouragement, not loud, but the more dangerous for that, the fresh burst of fury which rose as the village smith and another came in and learned the news,

the menacing gestures of a score of brandished fists-these sights, though they told of the very effect at which I had aimed, scared as well as pleased me. I turned red and white, and hesitated, fearing that I had gone too far.

The thing was done, however; and, what was more, I had soon to take care of myself. At the very moment when the hubbub was at its loudest I felt a chill run down my back as I met the monk's eye, and, reading in it whimsical admiration, read in it something besides, and that was an unmistakable menace. "Clever lad!" the eye said. "I will expose you," it threatened.

I had forgotten him-or, at any rate, that my acting would be transparent enough to him holding the clew in his hand-and his look was like the shock of cold water to me. But it is wonderful how keen the wits grow on the grindstone of necessity. With scarcely a second's hesitation I drew out my only piece of gold, and unnoticed by the other men, who were busy swearing at and encouraging one another, I disclosed a morsel of it. The monk's crafty eye glistened. I laid my finger on my lips.

He held up two fingers.

I shook my head and showed an empty palm. I had no more. He nodded; and the relief that nod gave me was great. Before I had time, however, to consider the narrowness of my escape, a movement of the crowd-for the news had spread with strange swiftness, and there was now a crowd assembled which more than filled the room-proclaimed that the purveyor had come out, and was in the street.

The room was nearly emptied at a rush. Though I prudently remained behind, I could, through the open window, hear as well as see what passed. The leading spirits had naturally struggled out first, and were gathered, sullen and full of dangerous possibilities, about the porch.

I suppose the Bishop's messenger saw in them nothing but a crowd of country clowns, for he came hectoring toward the door, smiting his boot with his whip, and puffing out his red cheeks mightily. He felt brave enough, now that he had dined and had at his back three stout constables sworn to keep the Queen's peace.

"Make way! Make way, there, do you hear?" he cried in a husky, pompous voice. "Make way!" he repeated, lightly touching the nearest man with his switch. "I am on the Queen's service, boobies, and must not be hindered."

The man swore at him, but did not budge, and the bully, brought up thus sharply, awoke to the lowering faces and threatening looks which confronted him. He changed color a little. But the ale was still in him, and, forgetting his natural discretion, he thought to carry matters with a high hand. "Come! come!" he exclaimed angrily. "I have a warrant, and you resist me at your peril. I have to enter this house. Clear the way, Master Hundredman, and break these fellows' heads if they withstand you."

A growl as of a dozen bulldogs answered him, and he drew back, as a child might who has trodden on an adder. "You fools!" he spluttered, glaring at them viciously. "Are you mad? Do you

know what you are doing? Do you see this?" He whipped out from some pocket a short white staff and brandished it. "I come direct from the Lord Chancellor and upon his business, do you hear, and if you resist me it is treason. Treason, you dogs!" he cried, his rage getting the better of him, "and like dogs you will hang for it. Master Hundredman, I order you to take in your constables and arrest that man!"

"What man?" quoth Tom Miller, eying him fixedly.

"The stranger who came in an hour ago, and is inside the house."

"Him, he means, who told about the purveyor across the road," explained the monk with a wink.

That wink sufficed. There was a roar of execration, and in the twinkling of an eye the Jack-in-office, tripped up this way and shoved that, was struggling helplessly in the grasp of half a dozen men, who fought savagely for his body with the Hundredman and the constables.

"To the river! To the Ouse with him!" yelled the mob. "In the Queen's name!" shouted the officers. But these were to those as three to a score, and taken by surprise besides, and doubtful of the rights of the matter. Yet for an instant, as the crowd went reeling and fighting down the road, they prevailed; the constables managed to drag their leader free, and I caught a glimpse of him, wild-eyed and frantic with fear, his clothes torn from his back, standing at bay like some animal, and brandishing his staff in one hand, a packet of letters in the other.

"I have letters, letters of state!" he screamed shrilly. "Let me alone, I tell you! Let me go, you curs!"

But in vain. The next instant the mob were upon him again. The packet of letters went one way, the staff was dashed another. He was thrown down and plucked up again, and hurried, bruised and struggling, toward the river, his screams for mercy and furious threats rising shrilly above the oaths and laughter.

I felt myself growing pale as scream followed scream. "They will kill him!" I exclaimed trembling, and prepared to follow. "I cannot see this done."

But the monk, who had returned to my side, grasped my arm. "Don't be a fool," he said sharply. "I will answer for it they will not kill him. Tom Miller is not a fool, though he is angry. He will duck him, and let him go. But I will trouble you for that bit of gold, young gentleman."

I gave it to him.

"Now," he continued with a leer, "I will give you a hint in return. If you are wise, you will be out of this county in twelve hours. Tethered to the gate over there is a good horse which belongs to a certain purveyor now in the river. Take it! There is no one to say you nay. And begone!"

I looked hard at him for a minute, my heart beating fast. This was horse-stealing. And horse-stealing was a hanging matter. But I had done so much already that I felt I might as well be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb. I was not sure that I had not incited to treason, and what was stealing a horse beside that? "I will do

it!" I said desperately.

"Don't lose time, then," quoth my mentor.

I went out then and there, and found he had told the truth. Every soul in the place had gone to see the ducking, and the street was empty. Kicked aside in the roadway lay the bundle of letters, soiled but not torn, and in the gutter was the staff. I stooped and picked up one and the other-in for a lamb, in for a sheep! and they might be useful some day. Then I jumped into the saddle, and twitched the reins off the hook.

But before I could drive in the spurs, a hand fell on the bridle, and the monk's face appeared at my knee. "Well?" I said, glaring down at him-I was burning to be away.

"That is a good cloak you have got there," he muttered hurriedly. "There, strapped to the saddle, you fool. You do not want that, give it me. Do you hear? Quick, give it me," he cried, raising his voice and clutching at it fiercely, his face dark with greed and fear.

"I see," I replied, as I unstrapped it. "I am to steal the horse that you may get the cloak. And then you will lay the lot on my shoulders. Well, take it!" I cried, "and go your way as fast as you can."

Throwing it at him as hard as I could, I shook up the reins and went off down the road at a gallop. The wind whistled pleasantly past my ears. The sounds of the town grew faint and distant. Each bound of the good hack carried me farther and farther from present danger, farther and farther from the old life. In the

exhilaration and excitement of the moment I forgot my condition; forgot that I had not a penny-piece in my pocket, and that I had left an unpaid bill behind me; forgot even that I rode a-well, a borrowed horse.

CHAPTER IV

TWO SISTERS OF MERCY

A younger generation has often posed me finely by asking, "What, Sir Francis! Did you not see *one* bishop burned? Did you not know *one* of the martyrs? Did you *never* come face to face with Queen Mary?" To all which questions I have one answer, No, and I watch small eyes grow large with astonishment. But the truth is, a man can only be at one place at a time. And though, in this very month of February, 1555, Prebendary Rogers—a good, kindly man, as I have heard, who had a wife and nine children—was burned in Smithfield in London for religion, and the Bishop of Gloucester suffered in his own city, and other inoffensive men were burned to death, and there was much talk of these things, and in thousands of breasts a smoldering fire was kindled which blazed high enough by and by—why, I was at Coton End, or on the London Road, at the time, and learned such things only dimly and by hearsay.

But the rill joins the river at last; and oftentimes suddenly and at a bound, as it were. On this very day, while I cantered easily southward with my face set toward St. Albans, Providence was at work shaping a niche for me in the lives of certain people who were at the time as unconscious of my existence as I was of theirs. In a great house in the Barbican in London there was

much stealthy going and coming on this February afternoon and evening. Behind locked doors, and in fear and trembling, mails were being packed and bags strapped, and fingers almost too delicate for the task were busy with nails and hammers, securing this and closing that. The packers knew nothing of me, nor I of them. Yet but for me all that packing would have been of no avail; and but for them my fate might have been very different. Still, the sound of the hammer did not reach my ears, or, doing so, was covered by the steady tramp of the roadster; and no vision, so far as I ever heard, of a dusty youth riding Londonward came between the secret workers and their task.

I had made up my mind to sleep at St. Albans that night, and for this reason, and for others relating to the Sheriff of Buckinghamshire, in which county Stony Stratford lies, I pushed on briskly. I presently found time, however, to examine the packet of letters of which I had made spoil. On the outer wrapper I found there was no address, only an exhortation to be speedy. Off this came, therefore, without ceremony, and was left in the dirt. Inside I found two sealed epistles, each countersigned on the wrapper, "Stephen Winton."

"Ho! ho!" said I. "I did well to take them."

Over the signature on the first letter-it seemed to be written on parchment-were the words, "Haste! haste! haste!" This was the thicker and heavier of the two, and was addressed to Sir Maurice Berkeley, at St. Mary Overy's, Southwark, London. I turned it over and over in my hands, and peeped into it, hesitating. Twice I

muttered, "All is fair in love and war!" And at last, with curiosity fully awake, and a glance behind me to make sure that the act was unobserved, I broke the seal. The document proved to be as short and pithy as it was startling. It was an order commanding Sir Maurice Berkeley forthwith in the Queen's name, and by the authority of the Council, and so on, and so on, to arrest Katherine Willoughby de Eresby, Duchess of Suffolk, and to deliver her into the custody of the Lieutenant of the Tower, "These presents to be his waranty for the detention of the said Duchess of Suffolk until her Grace's pleasure in the matter be known."

When it was too late I trembled to think what I had done. To meddle with matters of state might be more dangerous a hundred times than stealing horses, or even than ducking the Chancellor's messenger! Seeing at this moment a party of travelers approach, I crammed the letter into my pocket, and rode by them with a red face, and a tongue that stuttered so feebly that I could scarcely return their greetings. When they had gone by I pulled out the warrant again, having it in my mind to tear it up without a moment's delay—to tear it into the smallest morsels, and so get rid of a thing most dangerous. But the great red seal dangling at the foot of the parchment caught my eye, and I paused to think. It was so red, so large, so imposing, it seemed a pity to destroy it. It must surely be good for something. I folded up the warrant again, and put it away in my safest pocket. Yes, it might be good for something.

I took out the other letter. It was bound with green ribbon

and sealed with extreme care, being directed simply to Mistress Clarence—there was no address. But over Gardiner's signature on the wrapper were the words, "These, on your peril, very privately."

I turned it over and over, and said the same thing about love and war, and even repeated to myself my old proverb about a sheep and a lamb. But somehow I could not do it. The letter was a woman's letter; the secret, her secret; and though my fingers itched as they hovered about the seals, my cheek tingled too. So at last, with a muttered, "What would Petronilla say?" I put it away unopened in the pocket where the warrant lay. The odds were immense that Mistress Clarence would never get it; but at least her secret should remain hers, my honor mine!

It was dark when I rode, thoroughly jaded, into St. Albans. I was splashed with mud up to the waist and wetted by a shower, and looked, I have no doubt, from the effect of my journeying on foot and horseback, as disreputable a fellow as might be. The consciousness too that I was without a penny, and the fear lest, careful as I had been to let no one outstrip me, the news of the riot at Stratford might have arrived, did not tend to give me assurance. I poked my head timidly into the great room, hoping that I might have it to myself. To my disgust it was full of people. Half-a-dozen travelers and as many townfolk were sitting round the fire, talking briskly over their evening draught. Yet I had no choice. I was hungry, and the thing had to be done, and I swaggered in, something of the sneak, no doubt, peeping through my bravado.

I remarked, as I took my seat by the fire and set to drying myself, that I was greeted by a momentary silence, and that two or three of the company began to eye me suspiciously.

There was one man, who sat on the settle in the warmest corner of the chimney, who seemed in particular to resent my damp neighborhood. His companions treated him with so much reverence, and he snubbed them so regularly, that I wondered who he was; and presently, listening to the conversation which went on round me, I had my curiosity satisfied. He was no less a personage than the Bailiff of St. Albans, and his manner befitted such a man; for it seemed to indicate that he thought himself heir to all the powers of the old Abbots under whose broad thumb his father and grandfather had groaned.

My conscience pricking me, I felt some misgiving when I saw him, after staring at me and whispering to two or three of his neighbors, beckon the landlord aside. His big round face and burly figure gave him a general likeness to bluff King Hal and he appeared to be aware of this himself, and to be inclined to ape the stout king's ways, which, I have heard my uncle say, were ever ways heavy for others' toes. For a while, however, seeing my supper come in, I forgot him. The bare-armed girl who brought it to me, and in whom my draggled condition seemed to provoke feelings of a different nature, lugged up a round table to the fire. On this she laid my meal, not scrupling to set aside some of the snug dry townfolk. Then she set a chair for me well in the blaze, and folding her arms in her apron stood to watch me fall to. I

did so with a will, and with each mouthful of beef and draught of ale, spirit and strength came back to me. The cits round me might sneer and shake their heads, and the travelers smile at my appetite. In five minutes I cared not a whit! I could give them back joke for joke, and laugh with the best of them.

Indeed, I had clean forgotten the Bailiff, when he stalked back to his place. But the moment our eyes met, I guessed there was trouble afoot. The landlord came with him and stood looking at me, sending off the wench with a flea in her ear; and I felt under his eye an uncomfortable consciousness that my purse was empty. Two or three late arrivals, to whom I suppose Master Bailiff had confided his suspicions, took their stand also in a half-circle and scanned me queerly. Altogether it struck me suddenly that I was in a tight place, and had need of my wits.

"Ahem!" said the Bailiff abruptly, taking skillful advantage of a lull in the talk. "Where from last, young man?" He spoke in a deep choky voice, and, if I was not mistaken, he winked one of his small eyes in the direction of his friends, as though to say, "Now see me pose him!"

But I only put another morsel in my mouth. For a moment indeed the temptation to reply "Towcester," seeing that such a journey over a middling road was something to brag of before the Highway Law came in, almost overcame me. But in time I bethought me of Stephen Gardiner's maxim, "Be slow to speak!" and I put another morsel in my mouth.

The Bailiff's face grew red, or rather, redder. "Come, young

man, did you hear me speak?" he said pompously. "Where from last?"

"From the road, sir," I replied, turning to him as if I had not heard him before. "And a very wet road it was."

A man who sat next me chuckled, being apparently a stranger like myself. But the Bailiff puffed himself into a still more striking likeness to King Henry, and including him in his scowl shouted at me, "Sirrah! don't bandy words with me! Which way did you come along the road, I asked."

It was on the tip of my tongue to answer saucily, "The right way!" But I reflected that I might be stopped; and to be stopped might mean to be hanged at worst, and something very unpleasant at best. So I controlled myself, and answered-though the man's arrogance was provoking enough-"I have come from Stratford, and I am going to London. Now you know as much as I do."

"Do I?" he said, with a sneer and a wink at the landlord.

"Yes, I think so," I answered patiently.

"Well, I don't!" he retorted, in vulgar triumph. "I don't. It is my opinion that you have come from London."

I went on with my supper.

"Do you hear?" he asked pompously, sticking his arms akimbo and looking round for sympathy. "You will have to give an account of yourself, young man. We will have no penniless rogues and sturdy vagabonds wandering about St. Albans."

"Penniless rogues do not go a-horseback," I answered. But

it was wonderful how my spirits sank again under that word "penniless." It hit me hard.

"Wait a bit," he said, raising his finger to command attention for his next question. "What is your religion, young man?"

"Oh!" I replied, putting down my knife and looking open scorn at him, "you are an inquisitor, are you?" At which words of mine there was a kind of stir. "You would burn me as I hear they burned Master Sandars at Coventry last week, would you? They were talking about it down the road."

"You will come to a bad end, young man!" he retorted viciously, his outstretched finger shaking as if the palsy had seized him. For this time my taunt had gone home, and more than one of the listeners standing on the outer edge of the group, and so beyond his ken, had muttered "shame." More than one face had grown dark. "You will come to a bad end!" he repeated. "If it be not here, then somewhere else! It is my opinion that you have come from London, and that you have been in trouble. There is a hue-and-cry out for a young fellow just your age, and a cock of your hackle, I judge, who is wanted for heresy. A Londoner too. You do not leave here until you have given an account of yourself, Master Jack-a-Dandy!" The party had all risen round me, and some of the hindmost had got on benches to see me the better. Among these, between two bacon flitches, I caught a glimpse of the serving-maid's face as she peered at me, pale and scared, and a queer impulse led me to nod to her—a reassuring little nod. I found myself growing cool and confident, seeing

myself so cornered.

"Easy! easy!" I said, "let a man finish his supper and get warmed in peace."

"Bishop Bonner will warm you!" cried the Bailiff.

"I dare say-as they warm people in Spain!" I sneered.

"He will be Bishop Burner to you!" shrieked the Bailiff, almost beside himself with rage at being so bearded by a lad.

"Take care!" I retorted. "Do not you speak evil of dignitaries, or you will be getting into trouble!"

He fairly writhed under this rejoinder.

"Landlord!" he spluttered. "I shall hold you responsible! If this person leaves your house, and is not forthcoming when wanted, you will suffer for it!"

The landlord scratched his head, being a good-natured fellow; but a bailiff is a bailiff, especially at St. Albans. And I was muddy and travel-stained, and quick of my tongue for one so young; which the middle-aged never like, though the old bear it better. He hesitated.

"Do not be a fool, Master Host!" I said. "I have something here-" and I touched my pocket, which happened to be near my sword-hilt-"that will make you rue it if you interfere with me!"

"Ho! ho!" cried the Bailiff, in haste and triumph. "So that is his tone! We have a tavern-brawler here, have we! A young swashbuckler! His tongue will not run so fast when he finds his feet in the stocks. Master landlord, call the watch! Call the watch at once, I command you!"

"You will do so at your peril!" I said sternly. Then, seeing that my manner had some effect upon all save the angry official, I gave way to the temptation to drive the matter home and secure my safety by the only means that seemed possible. It is an old story that one deception leads inevitably to another. I solemnly drew out the white staff I had taken from the apparitor. "Look here!" I continued, waving it. "Do you see this, you booby? I am traveling in the Queen's name, and on her service. By special commission, too, from the Chancellor! Is that plain speaking enough for you? And let me tell you, Master Bailiff," I added, fixing my eye upon him, "that my business is private, and that my Lord of Winchester will not be best pleased when he hears how I have had to declare myself. Do you think the Queen's servants go always in cloth of gold, you fool? The stocks indeed!"

I laughed out loudly and without effort, for there never was anything so absurd as the change in the Bailiff's visage. His color fled, his cheeks grew pendulous, his lip hung loose. He stared at me, gasping like a fish out of water, and seemed unable to move toe or finger. The rest enjoyed the scene, as people will enjoy a marvelous sudden stroke of fortune. It was as good as a stage pageant to them. They could not take their eyes from the pocket in which I had replaced my wand, and continued, long after I had returned to my meal, to gaze at me in respectful silence. The crestfallen Bailiff presently slipped out, and I was left cock of the walk, and for the rest of the evening enjoyed the fruits of victory.

They proved to be more substantial than I had expected, for, as

I was on my way upstairs to bed, the landlord preceding me with a light, a man accosted me, and beckoned me aside mysteriously.

"The Bailiff is very much annoyed," he said, speaking in a muffled voice behind his hand, while his eyes peered into mine.

"Well, what is that to me?" I replied, looking sternly at him. I was tired and sleepy after my meal. "He should not make such a fool of himself."

"Tut, tut, tut, tut! You misunderstood me, young sir," the man answered, plucking my sleeve as I turned away. "He regrets the annoyance he has caused you. A mistake, he says, a pure mistake, and he hopes you will have forgotten it by morning." Then, with a skillful hand, which seemed not unused to the task, he slid two coins into my palm. I looked at them, for a moment not perceiving his drift. Then I found they were two gold angels, and I began to understand. "Ahem!" I said, fingering them uneasily. "Yes. Well, well, I will look over it, I will look over it! Tell him from me," I continued, gaining confidence as I proceeded with my new rôle, "that he shall hear no more about it. He is zealous-perhaps over zealous!"

"That is it!" muttered the envoy eagerly; "that is it, my dear sir! You see perfectly how it is. He is zealous. Zealous in the Queen's service!"

"To be sure; and so I will report him. Tell him that so I will report him. And here, my good friend, take one of these for yourself," I added, magnificently giving him back half my fortune-young donkey that I was. "Drink to the Queen's health;

and so good-night to you."

He went away, bowing to the very ground, and, when the landlord likewise had left me, I was very merry over this, being in no mood for weighing words. The world seemed-to be sure, the ale was humming in my head, and I was in the landlord's best room-easy enough to conquer, provided one possessed a white staff. The fact that I had no right to mine only added-be it remembered I was young and foolish-to my enjoyment of its power. I went to bed in all comfort with it under my pillow, and slept soundly, untroubled by any dream of a mischance. But when did a lie ever help a man in the end?

When I awoke, which I seemed to do on a sudden, it was still dark. I wondered for a moment where I was, and what was the meaning of the shouting and knocking I heard. Then, discerning the faint outline of the window, I remembered the place in which I had gone to bed, and I sat up and listened. Some one-nay, several people-were drumming and kicking against the wooden doors of the inn-yard, and shouting besides, loud enough to raise the dead. In the next room to mine I caught the grumbling voices of persons disturbed, like myself, from sleep. And by and by a window was opened, and I heard the landlord ask what was the matter.

"In the Queen's name!" came the loud, impatient answer, given in a voice that rose above the ring of bridles and the stamping of iron hoofs, "open! and that quickly, Master Host. The watch are here, and we must search."

I waited to hear no more. I was out of bed, and huddling on my clothes, and thrusting my feet into my boots, like one possessed. My heart was beating as fast as if I had been running in a race, and my hands were shaking with the shock of the alarm. The impatient voice without was Master Pritchard's, and it rang with all the vengeful passion which I should have expected that gentleman, duped, ducked, and robbed, to be feeling. There would be little mercy to be had at his hands. Moreover, my ears, grown as keen for the moment as the hunted hare's, distinguished the tramping of at least half-a-dozen horses, so that it was clear that he had come with a force at his back. Resistance would be useless. My sole chance lay in flight-if flight should still be possible.

Even in my haste I did not forsake the talisman which had served me so well, but stayed an instant to thrust it into my pocket. The Cluddes have, I fancy, a knack of keeping cool in emergencies, getting, indeed, the cooler the greater the stress.

By this time the inn was thoroughly aroused. Doors were opening and shutting on all sides of me, and questions were being shouted in different tones from room to room. In the midst of the hubbub I heard the landlord come out muttering, and go downstairs to open the door. Instantly I unlatched mine, slipped through it stealthily, sneaked a step or two down the passage, and then came plump in the dark against some one who was moving as softly as myself. The surprise was complete, and I should have cried out at the unexpected collision, had not the unknown laid

a cold hand on my mouth, and gently pushed me back into my room.

Here there was now a faint glimmer of dawn, and by this I saw that my companion was the serving-maid. "Hist!" she said, speaking under her breath, "Is it you they want?"

I nodded.

"I thought so," she muttered. "Then you must get out through your window. You cannot pass them. They are a dozen or more, and armed. Quick! knot this about the bars. It is no great depth to the bottom, and the ground is soft from the rain."

She tore, as she spoke, the coverlet from the bed, and, twisting it into a kind of rope, helped me to secure one corner of it about the window-bar. "When you are down," she whispered, "keep along the wall to the right until you come to a haystack. Turn to the left there-you will have to ford the water-and you will soon be clear of the town. Look about you then, and you will see a horse-track, which leads to Elstree, running in a line with the London Road, but a mile from it and through woods. At Elstree any path to the left will take you to Barnet, and not two miles lost."

"Heaven bless you!" I said, turning from the gloom, the dark sky, and driving scud without to peer gratefully at her. "Heaven bless you for a good woman!"

"And God keep you for a bonny boy," she whispered.

I kissed her, forcing into her hands-a thing the remembrance of which is very pleasant to me to this day-my last piece of gold.

A moment more, and I stood unhurt, but almost up to my

knees in mud, in an alley bounded on both sides, as far as I could see, by blind walls. Stopping only to indicate by a low whistle that I was safe, I turned and sped away as fast as I could run in the direction which she had pointed out. There was no one abroad, and in a shorter time than I had expected I found myself outside the town, traveling over a kind of moorland tract bounded in the distance by woods.

Here I picked up the horse-track easily enough, and without stopping, save for a short breathing space, hurried along it, to gain the shelter of the trees. So far so good! I had reason to be thankful. But my case was still an indifferent one. More than once in getting out of the town I had slipped and fallen. I was wet through, and plastered with dirt owing to these mishaps; and my clothes were in a woeful plight. For a time excitement kept me up, however, and I made good way, warmed by the thought that I had again baffled the great Bishop. It was only when the day had come, and grown on to noon, and I saw no sign of any pursuers, that thought got the upper hand. Then I began to compare, with some bitterness of feeling, my present condition-wet, dirty, and homeless-with that which I had enjoyed only a week before; and it needed all my courage to support me. Skulking, half famished, between Barnet and Tottenham, often compelled to crouch in ditches or behind walls while travelers went by, and liable each instant to have to leave the highway and take to my heels, I had leisure to feel; and I did feel, more keenly, I think, that afternoon than at any later time, the bitterness of fortune. I cursed Stephen

Gardiner a dozen times, and dared not let my thoughts wander to my father. I had said that I would build my house afresh. Well, truly I was building it from the foundation.

It added very much to my misery that it rained all day a cold, half-frozen rain. The whole afternoon I spent in hiding, shivering and shaking in a hole under a ledge near Tottenham; being afraid to go into London before nightfall, lest I should be waited for at the gate and be captured. Chilled and bedraggled as I was, and weak through want of food which I dared not go out to beg, the terrors of capture got hold of my mind and presented to me one by one every horrible form of humiliation, the stocks, the pillory, the cart-tail; so that even Master Pritchard, could he have seen me and known my mind, might have pitied me; so that I loathe to this day the hours I spent in that foul hiding-place. Between a man's best and worse, there is little but a platter of food.

The way this was put an end to, I well remember. An old woman came into the field where I lay hid, to drive home a cow. I had had my eyes on this cow for at least an hour, having made up my mind to milk it for my own benefit as soon as the dusk fell. In my disappointment at seeing it driven off, and also out of a desire to learn whether the old dame might not be going to milk it in a corner of the pasture, in which case I might still get an after taste, I crawled so far out of my hole that, turning suddenly, she caught sight of me. I expected to see her hurry off, but she did not. She took a long look, and then came back toward me, making, however, as it seemed to me, as if she did not see me.

When she had come within a few feet of me, she looked down abruptly, and our eyes met. What she saw in mine I can only guess. In hers I read a divine pity. "Oh, poor lad!" she murmured; "oh, you poor, poor lad!" and there were tears in her voice.

I was so weak-it was almost twenty-four hours since I had tasted food, and I had come twenty-four miles in the time-that at that I broke down, and cried like a child.

I learned later that the old woman took me for just the same person for whom the Bailiff at St. Albans had mistaken me, a young apprentice named Hunter, who had got into trouble about religion, and was at this time hiding up and down the country; Bishop Bonner having clapped his father into jail until the son should come to hand. But her kind heart knew no distinction of creeds. She took me to her cottage as soon as night fell, and warmed, and dried, and fed me. She did not dare to keep me under her roof for longer than an hour or two, neither would I have stayed to endanger her. But she sent me out a new man, with a crust, moreover, in my pocket. A hundred times between Tottenham and Aldersgate I said "God bless her!" And I say so now.

So twice in one day, and that the gloomiest day of my life, I was succored by a woman. I have never forgotten it. I have tried to keep it always in mind; remembering too a saying of my uncle's, that "there is nothing on earth so merciful as a good woman, or so pitiless as a bad one!"

CHAPTER V

MISTRESS BERTRAM

"Ding! ding! ding! Aid ye the poor! Pray for the dead! Five o'clock and a murky morning."

The noise of the bell, and the cry which accompanied it, roused me from my first sleep in London, and that with a vengeance; the bell being rung and the words uttered within three feet of my head. Where did I sleep, then? Well, I had found a cozy resting-place behind some boards which stood propped against the wall of a baker's oven in a street near Moorgate. The wall was warm and smelt of new bread, and another besides myself had discovered its advantages. This was the watchman, who had slumbered away most of his vigil cheek by jowl with me, but, morning approaching, had roused himself, and before he was well out of his bed, certainly before he had left his bedroom, had begun-the ungrateful wretch-to prove his watchfulness by disturbing every one else.

I sat up and rubbed my eyes, grinding my shoulders well against the wall for warmth. I had no need to turn out yet, but I began to think, and the more I thought the harder I stared at the planks six inches before my nose. My thoughts turned upon a very knotty point; one that I had never seriously considered before. What was I going to do next? How was I going to live or

to rear the new house of which I have made mention? Hitherto I had aimed simply at reaching London. London had paraded itself before my mind-though my mind should have known better-not as a town of cold streets and dreary alleys and shops open from seven to four with perhaps here and there a vacant place for an apprentice; but as a gilded city of adventure and romance, in which a young man of enterprise, whether he wanted to go abroad or to rise at home, might be sure of finding his sword weighed, priced, and bought up on the instant, and himself valued at his own standard.

But London reached, the hoarding in Moorgate reached, and five o'clock in the morning reached, somehow these visions faded rapidly. In the cold reality left to me I felt myself astray. If I would stay at home, who was going to employ me? To whom should I apply? What patron had I? Or if I would go abroad, how was I to set about it? how find a vessel, seeing that I might expect to be arrested the moment I showed my face in daylight?

Here all my experience failed me. I did not know what to do, though the time had come for action, and I must do or starve. It had been all very well when I was at Coton, to propose that I would go up to London, and get across the water-such had been my dim notion-to the Courtenays and Killigrews, who, with other refugees, Protestants for the most part, were lying on the French coast, waiting for better times. But now that I was in London, and as good as an outlaw myself, I saw no means of going to them. I seemed farther from my goal than I had been in Warwickshire.

Thinking very blankly over this I began to munch the piece of bread which I owed to the old dame at Tottenham; and had solemnly got through half of it, when the sound of rapid footsteps-the footsteps of women, I judged from the lightness of the tread-caused me to hold my hand and listen. Whoever they were-and I wondered, for it was still early, and I had heard no one pass since the watchman left me-they came to a stand in front of my shelter, and one of them spoke. Her words made me start; unmistakably the voice was a gentlewoman's, such as I had not heard for almost a week. And at this place and hour, on the raw borderland of day and night, a gentlewoman was the last person I expected to light upon. Yet if the speaker were not some one of station, Petronilla's lessons had been thrown away upon me.

The words were uttered in a low voice; but the planks in front of me were thin, and the speaker was actually leaning against them. I caught every accent of what seemed to be the answer to a question. "Yes, yes! It is all right!" she said, a covert ring of impatience in her tone. "Take breath a moment. I do not see him now."

"Thank Heaven!" muttered another voice. As I had fancied, there were two persons. The latter speaker's tone smacked equally of breeding with the former's, but was rounder and fuller, and more masterful; and she appeared to be out of breath. "Then perhaps we have thrown him off the trail," she continued, after a short pause, in which she seemed to have somewhat recovered herself. "I distrusted him from the first, Anne-from the first. Yet,

do you know, I never feared him as I did Master Clarence; and as it was too much to hope that we should be rid of both at once—they took good care of that—why, the attempt had to be made while he was at home. But I always felt he was a spy."

"Who? Master Clarence?" asked she who had spoken first.

"Ay, he certainly. But I did not mean him, I meant Philip."

"Well, I-I said at first, you remember, that it was a foolhardy enterprise, mistress!"

"Tut, tut, girl!" quoth the other tartly—this time the impatience lay with her, and she took no pains to conceal it—"we are not beaten yet. Come, look about! Cannot you remember where we are, nor which way the river should be? If the dawn were come, we could tell."

"But with the dawn—"

"The streets would fill. True, and, Master Philip giving the alarm, we should be detected before we had gone far. The more need, girl, to lose no time. I have my breath again, and the child is asleep. Let us venture one way or the other, and Heaven grant it be the right one!"

"Let me see," the younger woman answered slowly, as if in doubt. "Did we come by the church? No; we came the other way. Let us try this turning, then."

"Why, child, we came that way," was the decided answer. "What are you thinking of? That would take us straight back into his arms, the wretch! Come, come! you loiter," continued this, the more masculine speaker, "and a minute may make all the

difference between a prison and freedom. If we can reach the Lion Wharf by seven-it is like to be a dark morning and foggy-we may still escape before Master Philip brings the watch upon us."

They moved briskly away as she spoke, and her words were already growing indistinct from distance, while I remained still, idly seeking the clew to their talk and muttering over and over again the name Clarence, which seemed familiar to me, when a cry of alarm, in which I recognized one of their voices, cut short my reverie. I crawled with all speed from my shelter, and stood up, being still in a line with the boards, and not easily distinguishable. As she had said, it was a dark morning; but the roofs of the houses-now high, now low-could be plainly discerned against a gray, drifting sky wherein the first signs of dawn were visible; and the blank outlines of the streets, which met at this point, could be seen. Six or seven yards from me, in the middle of the roadway, stood three dusky figures, of whom I judged the nearer, from their attitudes, to be the two women. The farthest seemed to be a man.

I was astonished to see that he was standing cap in hand; nay, I was disgusted as well, for I had crept out hot-fisted, expecting to be called upon to defend the women. But, despite the cry I had heard, they were talking to him quietly enough, as far as I could hear. And in a minute or so I saw the taller woman give him something.

He took it with a low bow, and appeared almost to sweep the dirt with his bonnet. She waved her hand in dismissal, and he

stood back still uncovered. And-hey, presto! the women tripped swiftly away.

By this time my curiosity was intensely excited, but for a moment I thought it was doomed to disappointment. I thought that it was all over. It was not, by any means. The man stood looking after them until they reached the corner, and the moment they had passed it, he followed. His stealthy manner of going, and his fashion of peering after them, was enough for me. I guessed at once that he was dogging them, following them unknown to them and against their will; and with considerable elation I started after him, using the same precautions. What was sauce for the geese was sauce for the gander! So we went, two-one-one, slipping after one another through half a dozen dark streets, tending generally southward.

Following him in this way I seldom caught a glimpse of the women. The man kept at a considerable distance behind them, and I had my attention fixed on him. But once or twice, when, turning a corner, I all but trod on his heels, I saw them; and presently an odd point about them struck me. There was a white kerchief or something attached apparently to the back of the one's cloak, which considerably assisted my stealthy friend to keep them in view. It puzzled me. Was it a signal to him? Was he really all the time acting in concert with them; and was I throwing away my pains? Or was the white object which so betrayed them merely the result of carelessness, and the lack of foresight of women grappling with a condition of things to which they were

unaccustomed? Of course I could not decide this, the more as, at that distance, I failed to distinguish what the white something was, or even which of the two wore it.

Presently I got a clew to our position, for we crossed Cheapside close to Paul's Cross, which my childish memories of the town enabled me to recognize, even by that light. Here my friend looked up and down, and hung a minute on his heel before he followed the women, as if expecting or looking for some one. It might be that he was trying to make certain that the watch were not in sight. They were not, at any rate. Probably they had gone home to bed, for the morning was growing. And, after a momentary hesitation, he plunged into the narrow street down which the women had flitted.

He had only gone a few yards when I heard him cry out. The next instant, almost running against him myself, I saw what had happened. The women had craftily lain in wait for him in the little court into which the street ran and had caught him as neatly as could be. When I came upon them the taller woman was standing at bay with a passion that was almost fury in her pose and gesture. Her face, from which the hood of a coarse cloak had fallen back, was pale with anger; her gray eyes flashed, her teeth glimmered. Seeing her thus, and seeing the burden she carried under her cloak—which instinct told me was her child—I thought of a tigress brought to bay.

"You lying knave!" she hissed. "You Judas!"

The man recoiled a couple of paces, and in recoiling nearly

touched me.

"What would you?" she continued. "What do you want? What would you do? You have been paid to go. Go, and leave us!"

"I dare not," he muttered, keeping away from her as if he dreaded a blow. She looked a woman who could deal a blow, a woman who could both love and hate fiercely and openly-as proud and frank and haughty a lady as I had ever seen in my life. "I dare not," he muttered sullenly; "I have my orders."

"Oh!" she cried, with scorn. "You have your orders, have you! The murder is out. But from whom, sirrah? Whose orders are to supersede mine? I would King Harry were alive, and I would have you whipped to Tyburn. Speak, rogue; who bade you follow me?"

He shook his head.

She looked about her wildly, passionately, and I saw that she was at her wits' end what to do, or how to escape him. But she was a woman. When she next spoke there was a marvelous change in her. Her face had grown soft, her voice low. "Philip," she said gently, "the purse was light. I will give you more. I will give you treble the amount within a few weeks, and I will thank you on my knees, and my husband shall be such a friend to you as you have never dreamed of, if you will only go home and be silent. Only that-or, better still, walk the streets an hour, and then report that you lost sight of us. Think, man, think!" she cried with energy-"the times may change. A little more, and Wyatt had been master of London last year. Now the people are fuller

of discontent than ever, and these burnings and torturings, these Spaniards in the streets-England will not endure them long. The times will change. Let us go, and you will have a friend-when most you need one."

He shook his head sullenly. "I dare not do it," he said. And somehow I got the idea that he was telling the truth, and that it was not the man's stubborn nature only that withstood the bribe and the plea. He spoke as if he were repeating a lesson and the master were present.

When she saw that she could not move him, the anger, which I think came more naturally to her, broke out afresh. "You will not, you hound!" she cried. "Will neither threats nor promises move you?"

"Neither," he answered doggedly; "I have my orders."

So far, I had remained a quiet listener, standing in the mouth of the lane which opened upon the court where they were. The women had taken no notice of me; either because they did not see me, or because, seeing me, they thought that I was a hanger-on of the man before them. And he, having his back to me, and his eyes on them, could not see me. It was a surprise to him-a very great surprise, I think-when I took three steps forward, and gripped him by the scruff of his neck.

"You have your orders, have you?" I muttered in his ear, as I shook him to and fro, while the taller woman started back and the younger uttered a cry of alarm at my sudden appearance. "Well, you will not obey them. Do you hear? Your employer may go

hang! You will do just what these ladies please to ask of you."

He struggled an instant; but he was an undersized man, and he could not loosen the hold which I had secured at my leisure. Then I noticed his hand going to his girdle in a suspicious way. "Stop that!" I said, flashing before his eyes a short, broad blade, which had cut many a deer's throat in Old Arden Forest. "You had better keep quiet, or it will be the worse for you! Now, mistress," I continued, "you can dispose of this little man as you please."

"Who are you?" she said, after a pause; during which she had stared at me in open astonishment. No doubt I was a wild-looking figure.

"A friend," I replied. "Or one who would be such. I saw this fellow follow you, and I followed him. For the last five minutes I have been listening to your talk. He was not amenable to reason then, but I think he will be now. What shall I do with him?"

She smiled faintly, but did not answer at once, the coolness and resolution with which she had faced him before failing her now, possibly in sheer astonishment, or because my appearance at her side, by removing the strain, sapped the strength. "I do not know," she said at length, in a vague, puzzled tone.

"Well," I answered, "you are going to the Lion Wharf, and—"

"Oh, you fool!" she screamed out loud. "Oh, you fool!" she repeated bitterly. "Now you have told him all."

I stood confounded. My cheeks burned with shame, and her look of contempt cut me like a knife. That the reproach was deserved I knew at once, for the man in my grasp gave a start,

which proved that the information was not lost upon him. "Who told you?" the woman went on, clutching the child jealously to her breast, as though she saw herself menaced afresh. "Who told you about the Lion Wharf?"

"Never mind," I answered gloomily. "I have made a mistake, but it is easy to remedy it." And I took out my knife again. "Do you go on and leave us."

I hardly know whether I meant my threat or no. But my prisoner had no doubts. He shrieked out-a wild cry of fear which rang round the empty court-and by a rapid blow, despair giving him courage, he dashed the hunting-knife from my hand. This done he first flung himself on me, then tried by a sudden jerk to free himself. In a moment we were down on the stones, and tumbling over one another in the dirt, while he struggled to reach his knife, which was still in his girdle, and I strove to prevent him. The fight was sharp, but it lasted barely a minute. When the first effort of his despair was spent, I came uppermost, and he was but a child in my hands. Presently, with my knee on his chest, I looked up. The women were still there, the younger clinging to the other.

"Go! go!" I cried impatiently. Each second I expected the court to be invaded, for the man had screamed more than once.

But they hesitated. I had been forced to hurt him a little, and he was moaning piteously. "Who are you?" the elder woman asked-she who had spoken all through.

"Nay, never mind that!" I answered. "Do you go! Go, while

you can. You know the way to the Wharf."

"Yes," she answered. "But I cannot go and leave him at your mercy. Remember he is a man, and has—"

"He is a treacherous scoundrel," I answered, giving his throat a squeeze. "But he shall have one more chance. Listen, sirrah!" I continued to the man, "and stop that noise or I will knock out your teeth with my dagger-hilt. Listen and be silent. I shall go with these ladies, and I promise you this: If they are stopped or hindered on their way, or if evil happen to them at that wharf, whose name you had better forget, it will be the worse for you. Do you hear? You will suffer for it, though there be a dozen guards about you! Mind you," I added, "I have nothing to lose myself, for I am desperate already."

He vowed—the poor craven—with his stuttering tongue, that he would be true, and vowed it again and again. But I saw that his eyes did not meet mine. They glanced instead at the knife-blade, and I knew, even while I pretended to trust him, that he would betray us. My real hope lay in his fears, and in this, that as the fugitives knew the way to the wharf, and it could not now be far distant, we might reach it, and go on board some vessel—I had gathered they were flying the country—before this wretch could recover himself and get together a force to stop us. That was my real hope, and in that hope only I left him.

We went as fast as the women could walk. I did not trouble them with questions; indeed, I had myself no more leisure than enabled me to notice their general appearance, which was that

of comfortable tradesmen's womenfolk. Their cloaks and hoods were plainly fashioned, and of coarse stuff, their shoes were thick, and no jewel or scrap of lace, peeping out, betrayed them. Yet there was something in their carriage which could not be hidden, something which, to my eye, told tales; so that minute by minute I became more sure that this was really an adventure worth pursuing, and that London had kept a reward in store for me besides its cold stones and inhospitable streets.

The city was beginning to rouse itself. As we flitted through the lanes and alleys which lie between Cheapside and the river, we met many people, chiefly of the lower classes, on their way to work. Yet in spite of this, we had no need to fear observation, for, though the morning was fully come, with the light had arrived such a thick, choking, yellow fog as I, being for the most part country-bred, had never experienced. It was so dense and blinding that we had a difficulty in keeping together, and even hand in hand could scarcely see one another. In my wonder how my companions found their way, I presently failed to notice their condition, and only remarked the distress and exhaustion which one of them was suffering, when she began, notwithstanding all her efforts, to lag behind. Then I sprang forward, blaming myself much. "Forgive me," I said. "You are tired, and no wonder. Let me carry the child, mistress."

Exhausted as she was, she drew away from me jealously.

"No," she panted. "We are nearly there. I am better now." And she strained the child closer to her, as though she feared I might

take it from her by force.

"Well, if you will not trust me," I answered, "let your friend carry it for a time. I can see you are tired out."

Through the mist she bent forward, and peered into my face, her eyes scarcely a foot from mine. The scrutiny seemed to satisfy her. She drew a long breath and held out her burden. "No," she said; "you shall take him. I will trust you."

I took the little wrapped-up thing as gently as I could. "You shall not repent it, if I can help it, Mistress--"

"Bertram," she said.

"Mistress Bertram," I repeated. "Now let us get on and lose no time."

A walk of a hundred yards or so brought us clear of the houses, and revealed before us, in place of all else, a yellow curtain of fog. Below this, at our feet, yet apparently a long way from us, was a strange, pale line of shimmering light, which they told me was the water. At first I could hardly believe this. But, pausing a moment while my companions whispered together, dull creakings and groanings and uncouth shouts and cries, and at last the regular beat of oars, came to my ears out of the bank of vapor, and convinced me that we really had the river before us.

Mistress Bertram turned to me abruptly. "Listen," she said, "and decide for yourself, my friend. We are close to the wharf now, and in a few minutes shall know our fate. It is possible that we may be intercepted at this point, and if that happen, it will be bad for me and worse for any one aiding me. You have done

us gallant service, but you are young; and I am loath to drag you into perils which do not belong to you. Take my advice, then, and leave us now. I would I could reward you," she added hastily, "but that knave has my purse."

I put the child gently back into her arms. "Good-by," she said, with more feeling. "We thank you. Some day I may return to England, and have ample power—"

"Not so fast," I answered stiffly. "Did you think it possible, mistress, that I would desert you now? I gave you back the child only because it might hamper me, and will be safer with you. Come, let us on at once to the wharf."

"You mean it?" she said.

"Of a certainty!" I answered, settling my cap on my head with perhaps a boyish touch of the braggart.

At any rate, she did not take me at once at my word; and her thought for me touched me the more because I judged her—I know not exactly why—to be a woman not over prone to think of others. "Do not be reckless," she said slowly, her eyes intently fixed on mine. "I should be sorry to bring evil upon you. You are but a boy."

"And yet," I answered, smiling, "there is as good as a price upon my head already. I should be reckless if I stayed here. If you will take me with you, let us go. We have loitered too long already."

She turned then, asking no questions; but she looked at me from time to time in a puzzled way, as though she thought she

ought to know me-as though I reminded her of some one. Paying little heed to this then, I hurried her and her companion down to the water, traversing a stretch of foreshore strewn with piles of wood and stacks of barrels and old rotting boats, between which the mud lay deep. Fortunately it was high tide, and so we had not far to go. In a minute or two I distinguished the hull of a ship looming large through the fog; and a few more steps placed us safely on a floating raft, on the far side of which the vessel lay moored.

There was only one man to be seen lounging on the raft, and the neighborhood was quiet. My spirits rose as I looked round. "Is this the *Whelp*?" the tall lady asked. I had not heard the other open her mouth since the encounter in the court.

"Yes, it is the *Whelp*, madam," the man answered, saluting her and speaking formally, and with a foreign accent. "You are the lady who is expected?"

"I am," she answered, with authority. "Will you tell the captain that I desire to sail immediately, without a moment's delay? Do you understand?"

"Well, the tide is going out," quoth the sailor, dubiously, looking steadily into the fog, which hid the river. "It has just turned, it is true. But as to sailing-"

She cut him short. "Go, go! man. Tell your captain what I say. And let down a ladder for us to get on board."

He caught a rope which hung over the side, and, swinging himself up, disappeared. We stood below, listening to the weird

sounds which came off the water, the creaking and flapping of masts and canvas, the whir of wings and shrieks of unseen gulls, the distant hail of boatmen. A bell in the city solemnly tolled eight. The younger woman shivered. The elder's foot tapped impatiently on the planks. Shut in by the yellow walls of fog, I experienced a strange sense of solitude; it was as if we three were alone in the world—we three who had come together so strangely.

CHAPTER VI

MASTER CLARENCE

We had stood thus for a few moments when a harsh voice, hailing us from above, put an end to our several thoughts and forebodings. We looked up and I saw half a dozen night-capped heads thrust over the bulwarks. A rope ladder came hurtling down at our feet, and a man, nimbly descending, held it tight at the bottom. "Now, madame!" he said briskly. They all, I noticed, had the same foreign accent, yet all spoke English; a singularity I did not understand, until I learned later that the boat was the *Lions Whelp*, trading between London and Calais, and manned from the latter place.

Mistress Bertram ascended quickly and steadily, holding the baby in her arms. The other made some demur, lingering at the foot of the ladder and looking up as if afraid, until her companion chid her sharply. Then she too went up, but as she passed me—I was holding one side of the ladder steady—she shot at me from under her hood a look which disturbed me strangely.

It was the first time I had seen her face, and it was such a face as a man rarely forgets. Not because of its beauty; rather because it was a speaking face, a strange and expressive one, which the dark waving hair, swelling in thick clusters upon either temple, seemed to accentuate. The features were regular, but, the full

red lips excepted, rather thin than shapely. The nose, too, was prominent. But the eyes! The eyes seemed to glorify the dark brilliant thinness of the face, and to print it upon the memory. They were dark flashing eyes, and their smile seemed to me perpetually to challenge, to allure and repulse, and even to goad. Sometimes they were gay, more rarely sad, sometimes soft, and again hard as steel. They changed in a moment as one or another approached her. But always at their gayest, there was a suspicion of weariness and fatigue in their depths. Or so I thought later.

Something of this flashed through my mind as I followed her up the side. But once on board I glanced round, forgetting her in the novelty of my position. The *Whelp* was decked fore and aft only, the blackness of the hold gaping amidships, spanned by a narrow gangway, which served to connect the two decks. We found ourselves in the forepart, amid coils of rope and windlasses and water-casks; surrounded by half a dozen wild-looking sailors wearing blue knitted frocks and carrying sheath-knives at their girdles.

The foremost and biggest of these seemed to be the captain, although, so far as outward appearances went, the only difference between him and his crew lay in a marlin-spike which he wore slung to a thong beside his knife. When I reached the deck he was telling a long story to Mistress Bertram, and telling it very slowly. But the drift of it I soon gathered. While the fog lasted he could not put to sea.

"Nonsense!" cried my masterful companion, chafing at his

slowness of speech. "Why not? Would it be dangerous?"

"Well, madam, it would be dangerous," he answered, more slowly than ever. "Yes, it would be dangerous. And to put to sea in a fog? That is not seamanship. And your baggage has not arrived."

"Never mind my baggage!" she answered imperiously. "I have made other arrangements for it. Two or three things I know came on board last night. I want to start-to start at once, do you hear?"

The captain shook his head, and said sluggishly that it was impossible. Spitting on the deck he ground his heel leisurely round in a knothole. "Impossible," he repeated; "it would not be seamanship to start in a fog. When the fog lifts we will go. 'Twill be all the same to-morrow. We shall lie at Leigh to-night, whether we go now or go when the fog lifts."

"At Leigh?"

"That is it, madam."

"And when will you go from Leigh?" she cried indignantly.

"Daybreak to-morrow," he answered. "You leave it to me, mistress," he continued, in a tone of rough patronage, "and you will see your good man before you expect it."

"But, man!" she exclaimed, trembling with impotent rage. "Did not Master Bertram engage you to bring me across whenever I might be ready? Ay, and pay you handsomely for it? Did he not, sirrah?"

"To be sure, to be sure!" replied the giant unmoved. "Using seamanship, and not going to sea in a fog, if it please you."

"It does not please me!" she retorted. "And why stay at Leigh?"

He looked up at the rigging, then down at the deck. He set his heel in the knothole, and ground it round again. Then he looked at his questioner with a broad smile. "Well, mistress, for a very good reason. It is there your good man is waiting for you. Only," added this careful keeper of a secret, "he bade me not tell any one."

She uttered a low cry, which might have been an echo of her baby's cooing, and convulsively clasped the child more tightly to her. "He is at Leigh!" she murmured, flushing and trembling, another woman altogether. Even her voice was wonderfully changed. "He is really at Leigh, you say?"

"To be sure!" replied the captain, with a portentous wink and a mysterious roll of the head. "He is there safe enough! Safe enough, you may bet your handsome face to a rushlight. And we will be there to-night."

She started up with a wild gesture. For a moment she had sat down on a cask standing beside her, and forgotten our peril, and the probability that we might never see Leigh at all. Now, I have said, she started up. "No, no!" she cried, struggling for breath and utterance. "Oh, no! no! Let us go at once. We must start at once!" Her voice was hysterical in its sudden anxiety and terror, as the consciousness of our position rolled back upon her. "Captain! listen, listen!" she pleaded. "Let us start now, and my husband will give you double. I will promise you double whatever he said

if you will chance the fog."

I think all who heard her were moved, save the captain only. He rubbed his head and grinned. Slow and heavy, he saw nothing in her prayer save the freak of a woman wild to get to her man. He did not weigh her promise at a groat; she was but a woman. And being a foreigner, he did not perceive a certain air of breeding which might have influenced a native. He was one of those men against whose stupidity Father Carey used to say the gods fight in vain. When he answered good-naturedly, "No, no, mistress, it is impossible. It would not be seamanship," I felt that we might as well try to stop the ebbing tide as move him from his position.

The feeling was a maddening one. The special peril which menaced my companions I did not know; but I knew they feared pursuit, and I had every reason to fear it for myself. Yet at any moment, out of the fog which encircled us so closely that we could barely see the raft below-and the shore not at all-might come the tramp of hurrying feet and the stern hail of the law. It was maddening to think of this, and to know that we had only to cast off a rope or two in order to escape; and to know also that we were absolutely helpless.

I expected that Mistress Bertram, brave as she had shown herself, would burst into a passion of rage or tears. But apparently she had one hope left. She looked at me.

I tried to think-to think hard. Alas, I seemed only able to listen. An hour had gone by since we parted from that rascal in the court, and we might expect him to appear at any moment,

vengeful and exultant, with a posse at his back. Yet I tried hard to think; and the fog presently suggested a possible course. "Look here," I said suddenly, speaking for the first time, "if you do not start until the fog lifts, captain, we may as well breakfast ashore, and return presently."

"That is as you please," he answered indifferently.

"What do you think?" I said, turning to my companions with as much carelessness as I could command. "Had we not better do that?"

Mistress Bertram did not understand, but in her despair she obeyed the motion of my hand mechanically, and walked to the side. The younger woman followed more slowly, so that I had to speak to her with some curtness, bidding her make haste; for I was in a fever until we were clear of the *Whelp* and the Lion Wharf. It had struck me that, if the ship were not to leave at once, we were nowhere in so much danger as on board. At large in the fog we might escape detection for a time. Our pursuers might as well look for a needle in a haystack as seek us through it when once we were clear of the wharf. And this was not the end of my idea. But for the present it was enough. Therefore I took up Mistress Anne very short. "Come!" I said, "be quick! Let me help you."

She obeyed, and I was ashamed of my impatience when at the foot of the ladder she thanked me prettily. It was almost with good cheer in my voice and a rebound of spirits that I explained, as I hurried my companions across the raft, what my plan was.

The moment we were ashore I felt safer. The fog swallowed us up quick, as the Bible says. The very hull of the ship vanished from sight before we had gone half a dozen paces. I had never seen a London fog before, and to me it seemed portentous and providential; a marvel as great as the crimson hail which fell in the London gardens to mark her Majesty's accession.

Yet after all, without my happy thought, the fog would have availed us little. We had scarcely gone a score of yards before the cautious tread of several people hastening down the strand toward the wharf struck my ear. They were proceeding in silence, and we might not have noticed their approach if the foremost had not by chance tripped and fallen; whereupon one laughed and another swore. With a warning hand I grasped my companions' arms, and hurried them forward some paces until I felt sure that our figures could not be seen through the mist. Then I halted, and we stood listening, gazing into one another's strained eyes, while the steps came nearer and nearer, crossed our track and then with a noisy rush thundered on the wooden raft. My ear caught the jingle of harness and the clank of weapons.

"It is the watch," I muttered. "Come, and make no noise. What I want is a little this way. I fancy I saw it as we passed down to the wharf."

They turned with me, but we had not taken many steps before Mistress Anne, who was walking on my left side, stumbled over something. She tried to save herself, but failed and fell heavily, uttering as she did so a loud cry. I sprang to her assistance, and

even before I raised her I laid my hand lightly on her mouth. "Hush!" I said softly, "for safety's sake, make no noise. What is the matter?"

"Oh!" she moaned, making no effort to rise, "my ankle! my ankle! I am sure I have broken it."

I muttered my dismay, while Mistress Bertram, stooping anxiously, examined the injured limb. "Can you stand?" she asked.

But it was no time for questioning, and I put her aside. The troop which had passed were within easy hearing, and if there should be one among them familiar with the girl's voice, we might be pounced upon, fog or no fog. I felt that it was no time for ceremony, and picked Mistress Anne up in my arms, whispering to the elder woman: "Go on ahead! I think I see the boat. It is straight before you."

Luckily I was right, it was the boat; and so far well. But at the moment I spoke I heard a sudden outcry behind us, and knew the hunt was up. I plunged forward with my burden, recklessly and blindly, through mud and over obstacles. The wherry for which I was making was moored in the water a few feet from the edge. I had remarked it idly and without purpose as we came down to the wharf, and had even noticed that the oars were lying in it. Now, if we could reach it and start down the river for Leigh, we might by possibility gain that place, and meet Mistress Bertram's husband.

At any late, nothing in the world seemed so desirable to me

at the moment as the shelter of that boat. I plunged through the mud, and waded desperately through the water to it, Mistress Bertram scarce a whit behind me. I reached it, but reached it only as the foremost pursuer caught sight of us. I heard his shout of triumph, and somehow I bundled my burden into the boat. I remember that she clung about my neck in fear, and I had to loosen her hands roughly. But I did loosen them-in time. With one stroke of my hunting-knife, I severed the rope, and pushing off the boat with all my strength, sprang into it as it floated away-and was in time. But one second's delay would have undone us. Two men were already in the water up to their knees, and their very breath was hot on my face as we swung out into the stream.

Fortunately, I had had experience of boats on the Avon, at Bidford and Stratford, and could pull a good oar. For a moment indeed the wherry rolled and dipped as I snatched up the sculls; but I quickly got her in hand, and, bending to my work, sent her spinning through the mist, every stroke I pulled increasing the distance between us and our now unseen foes. Happily we were below London Bridge, and had not that dangerous passage to make. The river, too, was nearly clear of craft, and though once and again in the Pool a huge hulk loomed suddenly across our bows, and then faded behind us into the mist like some monstrous phantom, and so told of a danger narrowly escaped, I thought it best to run all risks, and go ahead as long as the tide should ebb.

It was strange how suddenly we had passed from storm into calm. Mistress Anne had bound her ankle with a handkerchief,

and bravely made light of the hurt; and now the two women sat crouching in the stern watching me, their heads together, their faces pale. The mist had closed round us, and we were alone again, gliding over the bosom of the great river that runs down to the sea. I was oddly struck by the strange current of life which for a week had tossed me from one adventure to another, only to bring me into contact at length with these two, and sweep me into the unknown whirlpool of their fortunes.

Who were they? A merchant's wife and her sister flying from Bishop Bonner's inquisition? I thought it likely. Their cloaks and hoods indeed, and all that I could see of their clothes, fell below such a condition; but probably they were worn as a disguise. Their speech rose as much above it, but I knew that of late many merchant's wives had become scholars, and might pass in noblemen's houses; even as in those days when London waxed fat, and set up and threw down governments, every alderman had come to ride in mail.

No doubt the women, watching me in anxious silence, were as curious about me. I still bore the stains of country travel. I was unwashed, unkempt, my doublet was torn, the cloak I had cast at my feet was the very wreck of a cloak. Yet I read no distrust in their looks. The elder's brave eyes seemed ever thanking me. I never saw her lips move silently that they did not shape "Well done!" And though I caught Mistress Anne scanning me once or twice with an expression I could ill interpret, a smile took its place the moment her gaze met mine.

We had passed, but were still in sight of, Greenwich Palace—as they told me—when the mist rose suddenly like a curtain rolled away, and the cold, bright February sun, shining out, disclosed the sparkling river with the green hills rising on our right hand. Here and there on its surface a small boat such as our own moved to and fro, and in the distant Pool from which we had come rose a little forest of masts. I hung on the oars a moment, and my eyes were drawn to a two-masted vessel which, nearly half a mile below us, was drifting down, gently heeling over with the current as the crew got up the sails. "I wonder whither she is bound," I said thoughtfully, "and whether they would take us on board by any chance."

Mistress Bertram shook her head. "I have no money," she answered sadly. "I fear we must go on to Leigh, if it be any way possible. You are tired, and no wonder. But what is it?" with a sudden change of voice. "What is the matter?"

I had flashed out the oars with a single touch, and begun to pull as fast as I could down the stream. No doubt my face, too, proclaimed my discovery and awoke her fears. "Look behind!" I muttered between my set teeth.

She turned, and on the instant uttered a low cry. A wherry like our own, but even lighter—in my first glance up the river I had not noticed it—had stolen nearer to us, and yet nearer, and now throwing aside disguise was in hot pursuit of us. There were three men on board, two rowing and one steering. When they saw that we had discovered them they hailed us in a loud voice,

and I heard the steersman's feet rattle on the boards, as he cried to his men to give way, and stamped in very eagerness. My only reply was to take a longer stroke, and, pulling hard, to sweep away from them.

But presently my first strength died away, and the work began to tell upon me, and little by little they overhauled us. Not that I gave up at once for that. They were still some sixty yards behind, and for a few minutes at any rate I might put off capture. In that time something might happen. At the worst they were only three to one, and their boat looked light and cranky and easy to upset.

So I pulled on, savagely straining at the oars. But my chest heaved and my arms ached more and more with each stroke. The banks slid by us; we turned one bend, then another, though I saw nothing of them. I saw only the pursuing boat, on which my eyes were fixed, heard only the measured rattle of the oars in the rowlocks. A minute, two minutes, three minutes passed. They had not gained on us, but the water was beginning to waver before my eyes, their boat seemed floating in the air, there was a pulsation in my ears louder than that of the oars, I struggled and yet I flagged. My knees trembled. Their boat shot nearer now, nearer and nearer, so that I could read the smile of triumph on the steersman's dark face and hear his cry of exultation. Nearer! and then with a cry I dropped the oars.

"Quick!" I panted to my companions. "Change places with me! So!" Trembling and out of breath as I was, I crawled between the women and gained the stern sheets of the boat. As I passed

Mistress Bertram she clutched my arm. Her eyes, as they met mine, flashed fire, her lips were white. "The man steering!" she hissed between her teeth. "Leave the others. He is Clarence, and I fear him!"

I nodded; but still, as the hostile boat bore swiftly down upon us, I cast a glance round to see if there were any help at hand. I saw no sign of any. I saw only the pale blue sky overhead, and the stream flowing swiftly under the boat. I drew my sword. The case was one rather for despair than courage. The women were in my charge, and if I did not acquit myself like a man now, when should I do so? Bah! it would soon be over.

There was an instant's confusion in the other boat, as the crew ceased rowing, and, seeing my attitude and not liking it, changed their seats. To my joy the man, who had hitherto been steering, flung a curse at the others and came forward to bear the brunt of the encounter. He was a tall, sinewy man, past middle age, with a clean-shaven face, a dark complexion, and cruel eyes. So he was Master Clarence! Well, he had the air of a swordsman and a soldier. I trembled for the women.

"Surrender, you fool!" he cried to me harshly. "In the Queen's name-do you hear? What do you in this company?"

I answered nothing, for I was out of breath. But softly, my eyes on his, I drew out with my left hand my hunting-knife. If I could beat aside his sword, I would spring upon him and drive the knife home with that hand. So, standing erect in bow and stern we faced one another, the man and the boy, the flush of rage and

exertion on my cheek, a dark shade on his. And silently the boats drew together.

Thought is quick, quicker than anything else in the world I suppose, for in some drawn-out second before the boats came together I had time to wonder where I had seen his face before, and to rack my memory. I knew no Master Clarence, yet I had seen this man somewhere. Another second, and away with thought! He was crouching for a spring. I drew back a little, then lunged-lunged with heart and hand. Our swords crossed and whistled-just crossed-and even as I saw his eyes gleam behind his point, the shock of the two boats coming together flung us both backward and apart. A moment we reeled, staggering and throwing out wild hands. I strove hard to recover myself, nay, I almost did so; then I caught my foot in Mistress Anne's cloak, which she had left in her place, and fell heavily back into the boat.

I was up in a moment-on my knees at least-and unhurt. But another was before me. As I stooped half-risen, I saw one moment a dark shadow above me, and the next a sheet of flame shone before my eyes, and a tremendous shock swept all away. I fell senseless into the bottom of the boat, knowing nothing of what had happened to me.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.