

Marshall Emma

Penshurst Castle in the Time of Sir Philip Sidney



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PREFACE

For the incidents in the life of Sir Philip Sidney, who is the central figure in this story of 'the spacious times of great Elizabeth,' I am indebted to Mr H. R. Fox Bourne's interesting and exhaustive Memoir of this noble knight and Christian gentleman.

In his short life of thirty-one years are crowded achievements as scholar, poet, statesman and soldier, which find perhaps few, if indeed any equal, in the records of history; a few only of these chosen from among many appear in the following pages. The characters of Mary Gifford and her sister, and the two brothers, Humphrey and George Ratcliffe, are wholly imaginary.

The books which have been consulted for the poetry of Sir Philip Sidney and the times in which he lived are – Vol. I. of *An English Garner*; M. Jusserand's *Roman du Temps de Shakespere*, and a very interesting essay on Sir Philip Sidney and his works, published in Cambridge in 1858.

*Woodside, Leigh Woods,
Clifton, October 5, 1893.*

BOOK I.

Penshurst Castle

'What man is he that boasts of fleshly might,
And vaine assurance of mortality;
Which, all so soone as it doth come to fight
Against spirituall foes, yields by and by:
Or from the field most cowardly doth fly?
No, let the man ascribe it to his skill,
That thorough grace hath gained victory.
If any strength we have, it is to ill;
But all the good is God's, both power and will.'

The Faery Queene, Book I. Canto 10.

CHAPTER I THE SISTERS

'She was right faire and fresh as morning rose,
But somewhat sad and solemne eke in sight,
As if some pensive thought constrained her gentle spright.'

Spenser.

1581. — 'There is time yet ere sunset; let me, I pray you, go down to the lych gate with the wheaten cake for Goody Salter.'

'Nay, Lucy; methinks there are reasons for your desire to go down to the village weightier than the wheaten cake you would fain carry with you. Rest quietly at home; it may be Humphrey will be coming to let us know if Mr Sidney has arrived at Penshurst. Why such haste, little sister?'

'Because I do covet a place where I can witness the grand tourney at Whitehall. It may suit your mood, Mary, to live always on this hilltop, with naught to see and naught to do; with no company but a cross-grained stepmother, and the cows and sheep. I am sick of it. Even a run down to the village is a change. Yes, I am going; one hour, and I will be back.'

Mary Gifford laid a detaining hand on her young sister's shoulder.

'Have a care, dear child, nor let your wild fancies run away with your discretion. Am I not one who has a right to caution you? I who have come back as a widow to my old home, bereft and lonely.'

'Because you married a bad man, and rued the day, it is no reason that I should do the same. Trust me, good sister. I may be young, but I have my wits about me, and no soft speeches catch me in a net.'

The elder sister's beautiful face, always grave and mournful in its earnestness, grew even more mournful than was its wont, as she looked down into her sister's lovely eyes, and kissed her forehead.

'Child, I pray God to keep you safe; but the net you speak of is not spread in the sight of any bird, and it is captured all unawares.'

Lucy's answer was to return her sister's kiss with a quick, warm embrace, and then she was off, with the basket on her arm, and her glad, young voice ringing out, —

'Good-bye! good-bye! I'll be back in an hour.'

Mary Gifford stood under the old stone porch, watching the light figure as it tripped away, and then was turning into the house again, when a sharp voice she knew too well called, —

'Lucy! Lucy! Where's that hussy? There's two pails of milk to set for cream in the pans, and the cakes are scorching before the fire. Lucy! Where's Lucy?'

Mary Gifford did not reply to the question, but said, —

'I will go to the dairy, mother, and see to the milk.'

'And take your boy with ye, I'll warrant, who will be up to mischief. No, no; it's Lucy's work, and she shall do it. It will be bedtime before we know it, for the sun is going down. Lucy!'

This time a child's voice was heard, as little feet pattered along the terrace outside Ford Manor.

'Aunt Lou is gone,' the child said. 'I saw her running down the hill.'

'Is she? She shall repent it, then, gadding off like that. More shame to you,' Mrs Forrester said wrathfully, 'to let her go, Mary, and cheat me by not telling me the truth. You want the child to go to ruin as you did yourself, I suppose.'

Mary Gifford's face flushed crimson, as she said, —

'It ill becomes my father's wife to taunt his daughter, when he is not here to defend her. Come with me, Ambrose, nor stay to listen to more hard words.'

But the child doubled his small fists, and said, approaching his grandmother, —

'I'll beat you. I'll kill you if you make mother cry! I will, you –'

'Hush, my little son,' Mary said, drawing the boy away. 'It is near thy bedtime. Come with me; nor forget thy manners if other folk are not mindful of theirs.'

The tears of mingled sorrow and anger were coursing each other down Mary Gifford's face, but she wiped them hastily away, and, putting her arm round the child, she led him up the narrow stairs leading from the large kitchen to the room above, where she sat down, with Ambrose clasped close to her heart, by the square bay window, which was flung open on this lovely April evening.

Ford Manor stood on the slope of the hill, commanding a view of the meadows stretching down to the valley, where the home of the Sidneys and the tower of the old church could be seen amongst the trees, now golden in the brilliant western sunshine of the spring evening. Perhaps there can scarcely be found a more enchanting prospect than that on which Mary Gifford looked, as she sat with her boy clasped in her arms, her heart, which had been pierced with many sorrows, still smarting with the sharp thrust her stepmother had given her.

That young sister whom she loved so passionately, about whom, in her gay thoughtless youth, she was so anxious, whom she was ever longing to see safe under the shelter of a good man's love – it was hard that her boy should hear such words from those pitiless lips – 'lead her to ruin!' – when her one desire was to shield her from all contamination of the evil world, of which she had herself had such bitter experience.

Little Ambrose was tired, after a day of incessant running hither and thither, and lay quiet with his head on his mother's breast, in that blissful state of contentment to find himself there, which gives the thrill of deepest joy to a mother's heart.

Ambrose was six years old, and a fair and even beautiful child. The stiff, ugly dress of the time, could not quite hide the symmetry of his rounded limbs, and the large ruff, now much crumpled after the day's wear, set off to advantage the round chin which rested on it and the rosy lips, which had just parted with a smile, as Mary said, —

'Is my boy sleepy?'

'No, mother; don't put me a-bed yet'

Mary was not unwilling to comply with the request, and so they sat on, the boy's red-gold curls making a gleam of brightness on the sombre black garments of widowhood which Mary still wore.

Presently the boy said, —

'When I'm a man, will Mr Philip Sidney let me be his esquire? Aunt Lou says p'raps he will, if you ask him.'

'My boy will not be a man for many a year yet,' Mary said, pressing the child closer. 'And he would not leave his mother even for Mr Philip Sidney.'

Ambrose sat upright, and said, —

'I would come back to you, as Humphrey Ratcliffe comes back to his mother, but I'd like to ride off with Mr Sidney when I am a man.'

'Yes, yes, my boy, all in good time.'

'And I must learn to ride and wrestle, and – oh! a hundred things. I wish to be a man like Mr Philip Sidney.'

'May you ever be as good, noble, and learned, my son; but come, the sun is gone to bed, and Ambrose must go too.'

Then, with loving hands, she prepared her child for his bed, smoothing back the shining hair from the pure white brow, where the blue veins were clearly traced, and Ambrose knelt at her knee and repeated his little prayer, adding, with childlike simplicity, after the Amen, —

'Pray, God, make me a good man, like Mr Philip Sidney.'

While Mary Gifford and little Ambrose were thus together in the upper chamber of Ford Manor, Lucy Forrester had reached the old timbered house by the lych gate of Penshurst Church, and had obtained admission at Goody Salter's door, and put the wheaten cake and two eggs on the little

rickety table which stood against the wall in the dark, low room. The old woman's thanks were not very profuse, hers was by no means a grateful disposition, and, perhaps, there was no great inducement for Lucy to prolong her visit. However that might be, it was very short, and she was soon outside again, and standing in the village street, looking right and left, as if expecting to see someone coming in either direction. It had not escaped Mary Gifford's notice that Lucy dressed herself with more than ordinary care. She wore the short skirt of the time, which displayed her small feet and ankles to advantage.

Over the skirt was a crimson kirtle of fine cloth, cut square in the bodice, and crossed by a thick white kerchief, edged with lace. Lucy's slender neck was set in a ruff, fastened at the throat by a gold brooch, which sparkled in the light.

Her chestnut hair was gathered up from her forehead, and a little pointed cap of black velvet, edged with gold, was set upon it, and contrasted well with the bright locks, from which a curl, either by accident or design, had been loosened, and rippled over her shoulder, below her waist.

Lucy was well known in the village, and, as she stood debating whether she should go home or wait for a few minutes longer, a man, with the badge of the Sidneys on his arm, came up on horseback, and turned into the park gate, which was near this end of the village.

'They must be coming now,' she said; 'they must be coming. Perhaps I shall see Humphrey, and he will tell me if Mr Sydney is returning this evening. I can hide behind the trees just outside the gate. No one will see me.'

Presently another horseman came riding slowly along. He was hailed by one of the loiterers in the street, and Lucy heard the question asked and answered.

'Yes, Mr Sydney is on the road. He is gone round by the main entrance, with two of his gentlemen.'

'He won't pass this way, then, to-night,' Lucy thought. 'Oh, I wish I could see him. Humphrey is so dull, and he won't ask him to do what I want. I know my Lady Mary would take me to see the show if Mr Philip wished, and –'

'Lucy, why are you here alone?' and the speaker dismounted, and, throwing the reins of his horse to a groom, he was at her side in a moment.

'I came down to bring food to the hungry. Where's the harm of that?'

'It is getting late. I'll walk up the hill with you. Lucy, does Mistress Gifford know of your coming?'

'What if she doesn't? I please myself; tell me, Humphrey, is Mr Sydney come home?'

'For a few days. He returns shortly for the great tournament at Whitehall in honour of the French Embassy.'

'On Sunday next. Oh, Humphrey, I do want to see it – to see Mr Sydney tilt. I would walk to London to see it, if I can't ride. There is so little time left. Why won't you ask – beg – pray someone to take me?'

'The tournament is put off. There is time enough and to spare. Her Majesty the Queen has desired delay, and a day in May is now fixed. Three weeks hence –'

'Three weeks hence! Then there is hope. I shall go to Lady Mary myself, if I don't see Mr Sydney.'

'Well, well, come home now, or Mistress Gifford will be full of fears about you. I marvel that you should add a drop of bitterness to her full cup.'

'I hate you to talk like that,' Lucy said. 'I love Mary better than all the world beside. No one loves her as I do.'

Humphrey Ratcliffe sighed.

'You speak rashly, like the wayward child you are. In sober earnest, Lucy, you are too fair to wander into the village alone, and you know it.'

'I wanted to go into the park, and then you came and stopped me.'

'If I did, so much the better,' was the reply. 'I will see you over the river, at least. Then I must return, to find out if Mr Sidney has any commands for the morrow.'

They had reached the River Medway now – in these days scarcely more than a shallow stream, crossed by stepping-stones, or by a narrow plank, with a handrail on one side only. When the river was low, it was easy to cross the ford, but, when swollen by heavy rains, it required some skill to do so, and many people preferred to use the plank as a means of crossing the stream.

Just as Lucy had put her foot on the first stepping-stone, and rejected all Humphrey's offers of help with a merry laugh, they were joined by Humphrey's brother, who was coming down the hill in the opposite direction.

'Stop! hold, Mistress Lucy!' he cried. 'Mistress Forrester, hold!'

'What for?' she said. 'I am coming over,' and with extraordinary swiftness, Lucy sprang from stone to stone, and, reaching the opposing bank, curtsied to George Ratcliffe, saying, —

'Your pleasure, sir?'

'My pleasure is that you should not put your limbs in peril by scaling those slippery stones. Why not take the bridge?'

'Because I like the ford better. Good-bye. Good-bye, Humphrey,' she called, waving her hand to the other brother who stood on the bank.

'Good-bye, Mistress Lucy, George will take care of you now. And make all haste homewards.'

Lucy now began to race up the steep hill at full speed, and her faithful squire had much difficulty to keep up with her light, airy footsteps.

He was a giant in height and build, and was breathless, when, at the turn on the side of the hill leading to Ford Manor, Lucy paused.

'You have no cause to come a step further,' she said, laughing. 'Why, Master Ratcliffe, you are puffing like old Meg when she has pulled the cart up the hill! Good even to you.'

'Stop, Mistress Forrester.'

'Well, now you are more respectful, I will stop. Well, pray thee, take breath, and make short work of what you are going to say.'

George hesitated, as much from shyness as from want of breath.

'My mother bids me say that she would fain have you sup with her on the morrow. Say yes, Lucy; say yes.'

'Oh! I must ask permission first,' she said, 'for, you know, I am a dutiful step-daughter; but commend me to your mother, and say I will come if they will permit me, for I love Madam Ratcliffe's sweet pasties. We do not get sweet pasties yonder. We are bidden to think all sweet and pleasant things unwholesome, and so we ought to believe it is true; but I don't, for one. Good-night.'

And Lucy was away along the rugged path at the side of the lane, with its deep ruts and loose stones, before George Ratcliffe could say another word.

He pursued his way for another mile up the hill, till he came to a house of rather more pretension than Ford Manor, but of the same character, with a heavy stone portico and square bays on either side. The diamond-shaped panes of the lattice were filled in with thick glass, which had only, within the last few years, replaced the horn which had admitted but little light into the room, and had been the first attempt at filling in the windows to keep out rain and storm. Until the latter years of Henry the Eighth's reign wooden shutters were universal even in the homes of the rich and great.

The Ratcliffes had held their land under the lords of Penshurst for more than two centuries, and had, as in duty bound, supplied men and arms, when called upon to do so by their chief.

The Forresters held also the same tenure of the pasture lands and meadows which sloped down from Ford Manor, and, in earlier times, they had been the keepers of the woods which clothed the undulating ground about Penshurst, and the stately beeches and chestnut trees which stand almost unrivalled in the far stretching park, where the grand old house of the Sidneys is situated.

But Mr Forrester, the father of Mary Gifford and Lucy, was the last of his race, and, though his widow and daughter still occupied the Manor Farm, the office of keeper of the woods had fallen to another family on a more distant part of the estate, and it was only by courtesy that Mrs Forrester was permitted to remain in the house for her life.

The Ratcliffes occupied a superior position, and Mrs Ratcliffe prided herself on her family, and considered Mrs Forrester very much beneath her in the social scale.

Was not her younger son the favourite squire of Mr Philip Sidney, an honour coveted by many, and had he not acquired the air and bearing of the gentlemen about the Court of the Maiden Queen, and was he not, moreover, educated in book learning as befitted his position. George, if more homely in his person and manner, was known in the whole district as a man of honour, and celebrated for his breed of horses, and for the excellence of his farm produce.

He superintended everything connected with the small estate, and supplied the neighbouring gentry with horses, when, perhaps for some hastily formed expedition, they were suddenly required.

Both brothers were respected in the neighbourhood, and Mrs Ratcliffe had indeed cause to be satisfied with the sons who had so well taken up the place their father had left vacant, by a sudden death in the prime of his manhood.

George Ratcliffe found his mother seated at the head of the long table, where the men and maidens employed on the farm were gathered at the lower end.

All rose when George entered, and he said, addressing his mother, as he seated himself near her, —

'I am later than I thought. I crave pardon, good mother.'

'Granted, my son,' was the reply, with an inclination of the head, which was, to say the least of it, very stately.

Mrs Ratcliffe stood always upon her dignity before her household, and never forgot herself, or allowed others to forget, that she was the daughter of a Knight of the Shire, and that her own family was connected with some of the leading people at Court. Distantly connected, but still the fact remained, and Mrs Ratcliffe made the most of it.

When the horn-handled knife had been struck thrice on the board by the bailiff, who sat at the lower end, the large party rose. George rose also, and said a short grace. Then the hall was deserted, the servants waiting till Madam retired to her room, before they cleared away the dishes.

George made a hasty meal, and then, giving his hand to his mother, he led her through a door at the upper end of the hall to her own parlour.

The spring twilight was deepening, and the figures of both mother and son were but dimly visible.

Perhaps George was not sorry that there was but little light for his mother to discover the blush which rose to his honest face, as he said, —

I saw Mistress Lucy Forrester an hour ago, and I bid her to sup with us on the morrow. I gained your consent to do so,' he added hurriedly.

'You told me of your purpose, George,' his mother said coldly. 'I did not forbid it, but I could hardly be said to consent. The poor girl may be well favoured; I do not deny it.'

'Who could deny it?' George exclaimed, with some heat.

'I said I did not deny it; but her relations are, methinks, very coarse.'

'Mother, there is not a gentler lady in the land than Mistress Gifford. If you doubt my word inquire of Mr Sidney or Lady Mary.'

'There is no occasion for this heat, George; it is unbecoming.'

'Pardon, my mother, but I cannot brook hearing Mistress Gifford and Mistress Lucy put down as coarse. Coarse!' he repeated — 'it is too much! They can't help themselves that their father chose to marry a virago like their stepmother. More shame to him; no shame to them.'

'Well-a-day, George, you are really upsetting me. I can hear no more. Stop this tirade, or I shall swoon; you know I never am fitted to bear loud voices, or contention and strife. You have bidden the girl to sup, and, as your cousin Dolly will be here, it will not be amiss for once. But I never desire to have intercourse with the folk at Ford Place. Although I am a widow, I must not forget your father's standing. I visit at the Castle, and dear Lady Mary is so good as to call me her friend. Thus, to be a friend of Mistress Forrester also is beyond my wish or desire, and surely you could not desire it.'

George did not reply at first, then he said, —

'Mr Philip Sidney does not despise Mistress Gifford; indeed, it is true, there is no scorn in him towards anyone that breathes, save only against mean cowards, liars and traitors. But I wish you a goodnight, mother. I have to see how the mare does that foaled this morning. She is of great value to me, and I would fain save her life, if may be.'

When her son was gone, Mistress Ratcliffe resigned herself to meditation.

'He is in love with that child, poor, silly boy. She may be pretty, but it is the beauty which soon fades. I must keep Dolly with me. She has a pretty fortune, if not a fair face, and is of our blood, and a meet match for my home-loving son. I have other hopes for Humphrey. He will wed with some gentlewoman about the Court. If Mr Philip Sidney wills to bring it about, it is done. Then I shall be a proud, happy mother, and I shall get out my taffeta with the old lace, and the ornaments I have not worn since my husband died, to do honour to the wedding. Humphrey will be knighted some fine day, and then he shall raise the family again to its proper level.'

CHAPTER II IN THE PARK

Sidney's sister, Pembroke's mother.
– Ben Jonson.

The dew lay upon the grass the next morning, and the eastern rays of the rising sun had but just shot across the slopes of Penshurst Park, when Philip Sidney passed from under the great gateway of the noble house – or castle, for it was embattled, by the king's leave, in the reign of Edward IV, – and crossed the turf towards the avenue of beeches now clothed in the tenderest hues of spring.

He was at this time in high favour at Court. The cloud which his brave protest against the Queen's marriage with the Duke of Anjou had cast over him had passed away, and he was again the favourite on whom Elizabeth smiled, and from whom she expected and received due homage. But the perpetual demands made by Elizabeth on her admiring courtiers was often felt to be irksome.

The chains might be silken, but they were, nevertheless, binding, and it was a relief to Philip Sidney to escape from the atmosphere of the Court at times, to breathe the pure air of his home in the fair land of Kent.

Penshurst Place was, and is, one of the most beautiful of the stately homes of England.

On this April morning the long *façade* was smiling in the early rays of the sun, and, as Philip crossed the Park he turned, and, looking back at it, felt stirring within him that pride of race and home, which is perhaps one of the strongest points in the character of a well-born Englishman.

'A fair inheritance, doubtless,' he said. 'All things are fair save where sin and wrong enters. Why should my good Languet have grudged me my retirement, and rejoice that I have again gone forth into the troublesome world. 'Success at Court is dearly bought, and I must ever bear about with me a burden which no mortal eye sees.'

As Philip Sidney paced under the shadow of the beeches, the deep bronze of fallen leaves at his feet glowing here and there into living gold, as the low rays of the eastern sun shone through the branches, thinly veiled, as yet, with tender green, to any casual observer, he did not wear the appearance of a man whose heart knew any bitterness or was weighted with any burden.

His light figure, with its easy swing as he walked, the perfect symmetry of every limb, the pose of his well-shaped head, from which he had removed the small cap with its short plume, raising his face that the fresh air might fan it, were all in harmony with the pride and glory of his young manhood. Suddenly his eyes shone with a smile of welcome, as a lady came from under the great chestnuts, which were already spreading their fan-like leaves from every branch, and exclaimed, —

'Ah! sister mine, I little thought I should find you before me breathing the soft pure air. It has brought the colour to your cheeks which I love to see.'

'Methinks those who lie a-bed late lose the best of the day, Philip, and how surpassingly lovely Penshurst is.'

'Wilton does not make it less dear, then, Mary.'

'Nay, both are beautiful, and,' she added, 'both are home now; but tender thoughts ever cling to the place where childhood has been passed. And how fares it with you, dear brother?' the Countess of Pembroke said, as she put her hand within Philip's arm.

'But ill, Mary. I strive, God knoweth, to conquer, but I cannot, I cannot.'

'Nay, Philip, you shall not say so. You must conquer.'

'If I could free myself from the chain – if I could – but it maddens me, Mary, to think she loved me, and that I was so blind, so blind. She is the wife of a man she loathes, and I – I am to blame. I, who would have died for her.'

'Live for her, Philip. Live to show her all that is noble and pure in your life, and so do her good and not evil. Yes, dear brother, by nurturing this love you do her a worse evil than you know of. Sure, you would not bring her to a new misery, a worse misery.'

'No, no. I would not, yet I would. But the sting lies here; hearken, Mary, to this sonnet, lately penned: —

'I might – unhappy word! O me! I might,
And then would not, or could not, see my bliss
Till now, wrapped in a most infernal night,
I find how heavenly day – wretch! I did miss.
Heart, rend thyself, thou dost thyself but right.
No lovely Paris made thy Helen his;
No force, no fraud, robbed thee of thy delight;
Nor Fortune of thy fortune author is.
But to myself, myself did give the blow,
While too much wit, forsooth, so troubled me,
That I respects, for both our sakes, must show.
And yet could not by rising morn foresee
How fair a day was near – O punished eyes!
That I had been more foolish, or more wise!'

Astrophel and Stella, Sonnet xxxiii.

'Dear brother,' the Countess of Pembroke said, – 'these wild laments are not worthy of you. You shall not make any man moan. You will conquer at last, and come out of the fight a nobler man. The very beauty around us seems to bid us rejoice to-day. Come, let us speak of happier themes. You will like to see my little Will, and carry back good news of him to the Queen, whose godson he is. Tell her she hath a brave knight in store in our little Will. You scarce ever saw such tricks as he has, and is not yet one year old.'

Philip Sidney threw off his melancholy mood at his sister's bidding, and, looking down at her, kissed her pure, fair forehead.

'Pembroke has reason to rejoice in possessing your love, Mary, and I doubt not the boy is worthy of you, though he does not, or did not, when I saw him, resemble you.'

'No, he is far handsomer; he has dark eyes and lashes; they lay curled upon his fair cheeks, making the only shadow there. Will has not the amber-coloured hair of us Sidney's.'

As this brother and sister stood together in the morning light under the spreading boughs of the trees, they bore a striking similarity to each other.

Theirs was not the mere beauty of form and feature, though that was in both remarkable.

Intellectual power was seen in the wide, straight brow, and the light of that inner fire we call genius shone in the eyes. It has been said by contemporary records that Philip Sidney's beauty was too feminine in its character; but, if in colouring of hair and complexion and delicate outline of feature, this might be true; there was wonderful strength of purpose in the mouth and upward curve of the chin which indicated resolution and courage, and determination to conquer difficulties.

His sister's words were to come true, 'You will conquer at last, and come out of the fight a nobler man.'

'We must turn homewards now. How long do you tarry here, Philip?'

'But two or three days. Shall we not journey to London in company with Mary. This tournament needs much preparation; I did but snatch a few days to speak on our father's affairs and to breathe freely for a short space, and then I must return.'

Philip Sidney sighed.

'Nay, Philip, what hardship is there in being the favourite of the Queen, save for the jealousy it may breed. Our good Uncle Leicester tells marvellous tales of the manner in which the fair ladies of the Court are ever ready to smile on you, to say nought of the Queen's own delight to have you near her. She seems to have forgotten your former protest against the Duke of Anjou, and to believe in your approval now.'

'It is scarce approval, Mary, but the Queen must do as she lists. She is of an age to discern what is best for herself and her realm.'

'She is, indeed, of an age to do so,' Mary said, with a silvery laugh. 'But queens never grow old, they leave the process to humbler folk, Philip.'

They had reached the house now, and passed under the gateway into the quadrangle, just as the big bell was making a great clamour with its iron, merciless tongue.

'Breakfast is served,' the Countess said, 'and our good mother will already be on the dais awaiting us. Would that our father were here with her. He will be present at the tournament, and I will do my utmost to persuade him to take a month of summer here at Penshurst, and dismiss all care for the time.'

Lady Mary welcomed her son and daughter with a glad smile. She had also been astir early, looking into the affairs of her household, in the home where the unbroken family so seldom met now. Lady Mary's life had been a chequered one, and she had suffered much as a wife, from the unfair treatment her brave, noble husband, Sir Henry Sidney, had received at the Queen's hand.

He was poor in purse and wounded in heart for his service in Ireland, from which he returned at last, losing everything but honour. He was also Lord President of Wales, and received small thanks for all he did in the interests of the Principality, and less gratitude. When breakfast was concluded, Lady Mary Sidney summoned Philip to a conference with her in the small ante-room, which was reached by a stone staircase at the upper end of the large hall.

'You came hither, my son, as your good father's officer. How do you feel towards this scheme? If my husband, your father, be sent for the fourth time to Ireland, will you accompany him, and serve him with the wisdom you ever show, Philip? It is time your father's services should gain some reward. Speak, Philip; do not hang back, but let me hear your mind.'

'Ah, sweet mother,' Philip said, seating himself on a settle at his mother's side, and taking her hand in his, 'do not think I slight my good father, or disparage all his great service for Ireland, if I say I cannot advise him to move in this matter. I was amazed when Molineux came charged with this mission to Court, and I told him I disapproved the appeal being made. For myself, I could not go thither to Ireland in the capacity my father speaks of; and as to the Queen conferring on him a title of nobility or large estates, she will never do it. I know this much, and I counsel my father to let the matter rest. He is held in respect at Ludlow, he has our own fair home of Penshurst as an inheritance, why, then, enfeebled in health, should he seek to be embroiled for the fourth time in the affairs of that unhappy country of Ireland? Misfortune followed his earlier footsteps there, is it to be counted on that as a man prematurely old and worn, he should have better success, say rather win more gratitude. Nay, dearest and best of wives and mothers, let me beg of you to dissuade my father from this project.'

'Philip,' Lady Sidney replied, with some heat, 'my heart throbs with indignation when I think of the treatment your noble father has received at the hands of the royal mistress he has served with honest devotion. He is no smooth-tongued courtier, Philip; he has taken no lessons in the school of flattery, and for this he is cast aside and misused. Think,' Lady Sidney said, 'think, Philip, of the scant and mean allowance of twenty pounds weekly he receives as President of Wales. Forsooth, to keep up any fitting dignity in our mansion it costs us thrice that sum. And if it is complained that I am with my dear spouse, and so add to the cost, sure I am worth my meat, of which my poor scarred face is a token. Scarce ever do I see these scars but I remember how I caught that baleful disease, from which God keep you, my son. Should He visit you with it, may you be tended with the care wherewith I tended the Queen's highness, when most of her attendants stood far off. Nay, Philip, I

fear you are in danger of forgetting the past service your parents have rendered, in the glamour of the present favour shown to you at Court.'

Lady Mary Sidney's voice trembled, and tears sprang to her eyes.

Philip could never brook the sight of his mother's distress; and he knew all she said was perfectly true and could not be contradicted.

'I will confer with my father on this matter,' he said. 'Dear mother, do not, I pray you, deem me hard and indifferent. As soon as this entertainment of the Ambassadors from France is over, I will set about inquiring into the aspect of affairs, and find out my Lord Burleigh's views. If I see cause to change my mind, I will not be too proud to own it.'

'That is like my noble Philip,' his mother said. 'Ah, my son, this heavy money trouble as to debts and ceaseless claims, makes of me an old woman, far more than the scars of the dire disease which snatched away my beauty twenty years ago. You were but a little fellow then, but then, as now, wise beyond your years. It was hard for me to meet your inquiring gaze, and to hear the smothered sigh as you looked on your mother's changed face. While little Mary drew back from my offered kiss, and cried out, "It is not my pretty mother," you put your arms round me, saying to her, "It is our own dear mother, Mary. Fie then, for shame," as she struggled to get away from the woman who tried to force her to kiss me.' Then with the swift change of mood which characterised Lady Sidney she stroked Philip's cheek, and said laughing, – 'How many fair ladies are sighing for your favour, my son? Truly the hearts of many must be in danger of capture. Wit, wisdom, learning and beauty such as yours do not often go hand in hand.'

'Nay; now, mother mine, I shall say you have taken lessons in the school of flattery, for which you were ready to take me to task not long ago. But I must away to look round the stables, and see to the proper equipment of the men who will ride with me to the tourney at Whitehall next month.'

Lucy Forrester found her household duties irksome the next morning.

A wrangle with her stepmother had ended in a stormy scene, when Mrs Forrester gave Lucy a sudden box on the ear for neglecting to replenish the fire on the open hearth with wood, so that when it was time to hang up the kettle to boil the meat for the dinner, served at eleven o'clock to the family, there were only a few smouldering white ashes left.

'As if I cared a groat for you! Box the other ear if you like, and kindle your own fire, for me.'

'You shall not have bite or sup in this house to-day,' Mrs Forrester screamed, as Lucy darted out of the kitchen, answering, —

'I don't want your food. I know where I shall be better served.'

With flashing eyes and heightened colour, Lucy found herself face to face, on the strip of rough ground before the house, with Humphrey Ratcliffe.

'Mistress Lucy,' he exclaimed, 'whether are you rushing like a whirlwind?'

'Anywhere, to get out of hearing of that tongue. Hark, now, it is still wagging like the clapper of a bell.'

'Where is Mistress Gifford?' Humphrey asked, without taking any notice of Lucy's reference to the quarrel which he guessed had been raging.

'Oh, it's Mary you want to see, not me,' Lucy said. 'Well, she is gone up to the shepherd's hut to look after a sick child there. She has got the boy with her, and I promised to see to the fire on the hearth, but I didn't, and that is the cause of the uproar. But good Master Humphrey, help me to get to London to see the great tourney. Oh!' clasping her hands in entreaty, 'I pray you help me to get there. I am so sick of this place. Why should I be kept here till I am old?'

'That is a far off day, Mistress Lucy,' Humphrey said. 'But I have a plan which, if it succeeds, may give you your desire.'

'Oh, you are good, Master Humphrey, so good!'

'My mother wishes to see London again, and I can provide her with lodgings not far from Whitehall. It may be there will be a corner found for you, that is to say, if Mistress Gifford approves.'

'I'll make her approve, I warrant. I am to sup with Mistress Ratcliffe this evening, and I will be as meek as a lamb and curtsy my lowest to her, and call her madam, and be ever so smiling to Master George. I'll win favour for once.'

Humphrey discreetly forbore to let Lucy know that it was at George's earnest desire he had determined to make this proposal to their mother.

'Tell me, Master Humphrey, will Mr Sidney be coming this way to-day?'

'It may be; he had to choose two extra horses from George's stalls for the journey. George himself is, of course, to be in attendance, and one of our serving men as groom. It is possible that Mr Sidney may be coming either to-day or on the morrow.'

'He will not pass without seeing Mary. I wish —'

But Lucy had not time to say what the wish was, for Mary Gifford and her little son were now seen coming along a field path which led down the hillside from the open country beyond.

Humphrey stepped forward quickly to meet them, and lifted Ambrose over the stile, in spite of his declaration that he could get over by himself.

Humphrey tossed the child high in the air before he set him on his legs again, and then said to Mary, —

'Out on a mission of mercy, as is your wont, Mistress Gifford.'

Mary's colour rose as she said, —

'The sick and poor are always in the world.'

'And the sad also,' Humphrey said, with an appealing look, which Mary understood only too well.

'Come and see the little chickies, Master Humphrey,' Ambrose said. 'There's three little ducks amongst them. Aunt Lou put the eggs under the old mother for fun. Grannie does not know, and when the little ducklings waddle off to the pond, she'll be in a fright, and think they'll all be drowned, and so will the hen.'

But Humphrey scarcely heeded the child's chatter, he was earnestly looking at Mary Gifford's face.

Surely there must be some fresh cause of trouble there, for he thought he saw traces of recent tears.

Little Ambrose, finding his appeal to Humphrey took no effect, scampered off to the poultry yard, Lucy following. She thought it would be wiser to leave Humphrey to plead her cause, and persuade Mary that if his mother would consent to her journey to London, she was better out of the way when Mary raised objections to the fulfilment of her wishes.

'Is there any new cause of trouble, Mistress Gifford,' Humphrey asked.

'Nothing new — as you take the word.'

'Nought in which I can be of help?'

Mary hesitated, and Humphrey said, —

'The wrangles and quarrels yonder are on the increase. Is that so?' he asked. 'I heard loud voices when I came up to the house a short time ago, and Lucy rushed out with flaming cheeks and sparkling eyes.'

'Poor child,' Mary said, 'I will not say there is not blame on both sides, but the life we lead yonder becomes more and more hard. It is ill training for my little son to see angry passions raging, and to hear loud reproaches.'

'I know it! I know it!' Humphrey exclaimed. 'End it, Mary — end it for ever, and come and bless me with your love.'

'Nay, Humphrey, do not urge me to do what is impossible. It cannot be.'

Humphrey Ratcliffe turned away with an impatient gesture, saying, —

'I see no glory in self-martyrdom. I offer you a home, and I swear to protect you from all evil, and keep your boy from evil, train him to be a noble gentleman, and, forsooth, you turn away and will have none of me.'

'Dear friend,' Mary began in a low voice, 'trust me so far as to believe that I have a reason – a good reason – for refusing what would be, I doubt not, a haven of calm after the troubled waters of my life. Trust me, kind Master Ratcliffe, nor think ill of me. I pray you.'

'Ill of you! nay, Mary, you know no saint in heaven is ever more devoutly worshipped than I worship you.' But, seeing her distress as he said these words, he went on, – 'I will wait, I will bide my time, and, meanwhile, serve you in all ways I can. Here is this child, your young sister, chafing against the life she leads here. I will do my best to persuade my mother to take her in her company to London for the grand show, and it may be that some great lady may take a fancy for her, and she may win a place as waiting-woman about the person of some Court dame. Do you consent? Do you give me permission to try?'

'But Lucy is not in favour with your mother; she disdains us as beneath her notice.'

'Not you – not Lucy; it is your father's widow whom she dislikes. Her Puritan whims and fancies are a cause of offence, and no aversions are so strong as those begotten by religious difference.'

'That is so, alas!' Mary Gifford said. 'Persecution for diversity of faith, rather for diversity in the form of worship: it is this that tears this country into baleful divisions, and pierces it with wounds which are slow to heal.'

'That is true,' Humphrey said; 'and the law, condemning all Papists to suffer extreme penalty, if found worshipping God after their own manner, has a cruel significance. But we must not forget the fires of Smithfield, nor the horrors to which this country was subjected when Spanish influence was at work with a Papist queen on the throne.'

'No,' Mary said in a low voice. 'Nor can we forget the grey head of that queen's dearest friend, which was brought to the block, and stirred the bitterness of revenge in Queen Mary's heart.'

'Well,' Humphrey said, 'I am vowed to resist, with all possible might, the encroachments of Spain, – which means the plotting of Philip to force the religion of the Pope upon an unwilling people – in the Low Countries first, and then, believe me, he will not stop there. Mr Sidney's protest against the Queen's marriage with the Duc of Anjou was founded on the horror he felt of seeing this realm given over once more to the power of the Pope. Mr Sidney saw, with his own eyes, the Massacre of St Bartholomew; and what security could there be if any of this crafty Medici race should be set on high in this country?'

'Mr Sidney has changed somewhat in his views. Is it not so?' Mary asked.

'He has submitted to the inevitable – that is to say, finding the Queen determined, he, with Lord Burleigh and others in high office, will confer with the ambassadors who come from France for the purpose – praying secretly, however, that the whole matter may fall to pieces. And, indeed, this is likely. The Queen's highness is loth to lose her supremacy, and there are favourites at Court who would ill brook to be displaced by a rival power. My lord the Earl of Leicester is one, though he hides his real feeling from his nephew, my noble master.'

Mary Gifford was silent for a few moments, then she said, —

'If you can aid my poor little sister to get her heart's desire, do so. I consent, for life here is not to be desired for many reasons. Ah! Master Ratcliffe,' Mary said, 'how fair is this world, and is there a fairer spot in it than these our native hills and valleys over which we look every day? See the wooded heights yonder, in all the varied colours of the early spring; see the sloping pastures, where the flowers make a carpet! Often as I look on it, and see the tower of the church rising amongst the red-tiled roofs of the cottages, and beyond, the stately pile of Penshurst Castle, I think if only sin were absent, and truth and righteousness reigned, this village would find no rival save in the Eden before the serpent entered, and the ruin came with sin!'

Humphrey Ratcliffe liked to watch Mary's face as she spoke; but, as he left her, a few minutes later, he felt there was something which divided them and made his suit hopeless. What was it?

He knew but little of the history of her short married life. Her suitor had come in the train of the Earl of Leicester in one of his visits to Penshurst.

That she had been cruelly deceived was known, and that she had come back to her old home of Ford Manor with her child, clad in the weeds of widowhood, but saying nothing of what had really happened. Rumour had been busy, and Ambrose Gifford had been supposed to have been slain in a disgraceful fight; but nothing was absolutely certain; and Humphrey Ratcliffe, who had known Mary from her girlhood, now discovered that he had loved her always, and that he had failed to win her in her early youth because he had never tried to do so, and now that he loved her passionately, he was to find his suit was hopeless.

Perhaps it was the similarity between his own case and that of his master's that made the tie between them stronger than is often the case between an esquire and his chief.

CHAPTER III

A STRANGE MEETING

'Before the door sat self-consuming Care,
Day and night keeping wary watch and ward
For fear lest Force or Fraud should unaware
Break in, and spoil the treasure there in gard.'

Spenser.

Lucy Forrester soon forgot the vexation and anger which her stepmother's scolding had roused. She kept out of her sight, and entertained little Ambrose with stories of fairies and elves and imps and hobgoblins till the time came for her to go up the hill to the Ratcliffes' house.

Lucy did not attempt to sit down at the board when dinner was served at eleven o'clock. She had once or twice, when in disgrace, rebelled at the sight of the crust of bread and the mug of water which had been set before her as a token of Mistress Forrester's displeasure.

'I am not a child now,' she thought, 'to be gaped at by serving men and maids. I will take care of myself in the buttery, and then get ready for my walk up the hill. Perhaps, who knows, I may chance to meet Mr Sidney, and I may get a word from him or a rare smile; and then a fig for frowns and the rating and scolding of fifty cross stepmothers! I wish Mary did not look so grave. I hate to grieve her. Well-a-day, if only I can get to London, and see him in the tourney, I shall die of joy.'

Lucy was scarcely sixteen, an enthusiastic child, who had conceived a romantic devotion for Mr Philip Sidney, and worshipped his ideal as maidens of her temperament have worshipped at their idol's shrine since time began.

And who can blame this country maiden if she cherished a passionate admiration for one, who won the hearts of Court ladies and hoary statesmen of a grave scholar like Hubert Languet, and of the Queen herself, who called him the brightest jewel of her Court, and who often excited the jealousy of her older favourites by the marks of favour she bestowed on him.

In the village church on Sundays Lucy would sit with anxious, eager expectation till she saw the Sidney pew filled; if Mr Sidney was present it was an hour or two of bliss; if, as was frequently the case, his place was empty, she would bow her head to hide the tears of vexation and disappointment which started to her eyes.

Nor have these dreams of youthful romance wholly passed away. Even in the rush and hurry of the prosaic world at the end of the nineteenth century they yet give a certain pleasure of unfulfilled longings to some young hearts, and fade away like the early cloud and morning dew, to leave behind only a memory of mingled pain and sweetness, recalled in after time with something of self-pity and something of surprise that such things had ever seemed real and not visionary, and had touched the warm springs in the heart now chilled, it may be, by the stern exigencies of this transitory life.

It must be said that few idols have been worthier of youthful adoration than was this true knight at whose shrine Lucy laid her heart. If there were spots in the sun, 'wandering isles of night,' which were at this time somewhat darkening its lustre, they were unknown to Lucy Forrester. Philip Sidney was to her all that was noble, pure, and true, and, as she put on her prettiest cap, with its long veil and little edge of seed pearls, Mary's gift, and crossed her finest kerchief across her breast, she saw herself in the bit of polished steel which served for her mirror, and smiled as she thought, —

'What if I meet him on the way, he may look at me with some approval. I cannot help it. I do love to be fair, and why should I pretend I am ugly, even to myself. No,' she went on turning her graceful head, first to the right and then to the left, before the little mirror; 'no, I can't pretend to be

ugly, like Doll Ratcliffe, who makes eyes at poor old George. She may have him, ay, and welcome, for all I care.'

Lucy was pirouetting round the confined space of her attic chamber, which was bare enough of all ornament, and mean and humble in its furniture, when little Ambrose's feet were heard on the wooden stairs leading to this upper story of the old house, and he called, in his loud, childish treble, —

'Aunt Lou, you are to come down and see Mr Sidney.'

Lucy clasped her small hands together in an ecstasy of delight.

'Is it true — is it true, Ambrose? Child, is it true?'

'I always say true things, mother saith lies are wicked,' the boy exclaimed. 'You are very pretty, Aunt Lou. I like you. I wish mother would wear red gowns, and — and —'

But Lucy paid no heed to the child's compliments. She gave a parting look at the mirror, and then brushed past little Ambrose and went downstairs with a beating heart.

Mr Sidney was standing on the rough ground before Ford Place, leaning against the gnarled trunk of an ancient thorn tree, which had yet life enough left in it to put forth its tiny, round buds of pink and white, soon to open and fill the air with fragrance.

By his side Mary Gifford stood, with her face turned towards the smiling landscape before her.

Philip Sidney, with the courtesy of the true gentleman, advanced to Lucy with his cap in his hand, bending the knee, and greeting her with all the grace and courtly ceremony with which he would have greeted the highest lady in the land.

The girl's face shone with proud delight, and the young voice trembled a little as she said, in answer to his question, —

'I thank you, sir, I am well and hearty.'

'I need scarce ask the question,' Mr Sidney said. 'With your good sister's approval, I came to inquire if you would care to fill the vacant place in my sister the Countess of Pembroke's household. She leaves Penshurst shortly, and will be at Leicester House before returning to Wilton. One of her gentlewomen is summoned to her father's deathbed, and Mistress Crawley, her bower-woman, needs help. I am not learned in the secrets of the toilette, but you would soon learn what might be expected of you.'

'And shall I see the great show, sir — shall I see the tourney and the knights tilting?' Lucy said, unable to repress her joy.

'Doubtless,' Mr Sidney replied laughing. 'But, Mistress Lucy, it will not be all play. Mistress Crawley is a somewhat stern task-mistress. My sister bade me say as much. Therefore, consider the proposal well, and consult Mistress Gifford, than whom you cannot have a wiser counsellor.'

'Mary,' Lucy exclaimed, 'I may go to serve my Lady of Pembroke? Speak, Mary.'

Mary Gifford now turned towards Lucy and Mr Sidney. Up to this time she had averted her face.

'You must remember, Lucy,' she said gently, 'Mr Sidney's words. It will not be all play, and, methinks, you have often shown impatience of control and undue heat when your will is crossed.'

Lucy's face flushed crimson, as she answered, —

'It is not kind to say this, Mary. You know — you must know how hard it is to please the one who rules here.'

'I know it, dear child, full well,' Mary said. 'But we must not hinder Mr Sidney longer. It will be only right to consult our stepmother, and crave leave of Mr Sidney to defer an answer till the morrow.'

'By all means, Mistress Gifford, do so,' Philip Sidney said.

While these words had passed between the two sisters, little Ambrose had been curiously stroking the hilt of Mr Sidney's sword, and fingering the wide ends of the belt which held it in its place.

'Oh,' the child said, 'I hope I shall have a sword when I am a man, and go to battle with you, sir. Will you take me with you when I am big and strong?'

'Will I not!' Mr Sidney said. 'The time may come when I shall want to gather all loyal hearts round me for service. I'll not forget you, Ambrose, if so it chances.'

'You are but a little child, my son,' Mary said, with a sudden gesture, putting her arm round him. 'You must stay with your mother for a long, long time, and be a dutiful son.'

'I am near seven years old, and I can fling a stone further than Giles, the cowherd's boy, and I can bend a bow, and –'

'Hush, my little son,' Mary Gifford said. 'Do not chatter of your doings. Mr Sidney does not care to hear of them.'

'Strength of limb is good,' Philip said, 'but strength of will is better, little Ambrose. Strive to be a dutiful son to the best of mothers. A fatherless boy has to do his utmost to have a care of his mother.'

The child left Philip Sidney's side, and went to his mother, who had turned away her face, with an exclamation of distress.

'Fatherless,' she repeated; 'ay, and worse than fatherless!'

But the words did not reach Mr Sidney's ears. His groom was waiting for him at the gate leading to the lane, and, taking Ambrose by the hand, he said, —

'Come with me, boy, and I will give you a ride to the end of the lane; and do you, Mistress Lucy, follow, and take back the young horseman when I have put him down, if it please you.'

'I will come also,' Mary Gifford said hastily.

She could scarcely bear her boy out of her sight, and watched him with anxious eyes, as Sir Philip set him on the saddle, across which his small legs could scarcely stride, the child dumb with delight, his eyes sparkling, his little hands clutching the bridle-rein, and his figure drawn up to its full height.

'Oh, have a care, Ambrose,' Mary exclaimed.

Mr Sidney laughed.

'He shall come to no harm, Mistress Gifford. My hand is ready to stop him if he falls. But, indeed, there is no fear; he sits square and upright, like a man.'

The beautiful, well-trained horse arched his neck in reply to his master's 'Softly, Hero – quietly,' as he stepped out, raising his feet deliberately, with that stately air which marks high breeding, and pacing down the rugged path of the lane, with slow and measured tread, Mr Sidney at his side, the groom in attendance following with the other horse.

'Oh, I would like to ride like thus far, far away,' the boy said, as Mr Sidney lifted him down, and set him by his mother's side.

'Make Mr Sidney your bow, and say you are grateful to him for this great kindness, Ambrose.'

The child was almost too excited to speak, but Mr Sidney sprang lightly into the saddle, and, with a parting smile to Lucy, with the words, 'We shall await your decision, Mistress Forrester,' he rode away, the groom following.

Lucy stood at the turn of the road, watching the horses and the riders, till they had disappeared, and then she returned to the house with Mary, like the child, too happy to speak. They reached the house together, and were met by Mrs Forrester.

She had heard of Mr Sidney's visit, and had hastened upstairs to exchange her coarse homespun for a gown of grey taffeta and a kirtle of the same colour; a large white cap or hood was set a little away on her thin, grey hair.

'You might have had the grace to ask Mr Sidney to step in,' she said sharply to Mary Gifford. 'It is ill manners to stand chaffering outside when the mistress of a house would fain offer a cup of mead to her guest. But I never look for aught but uncivil conduct from either of you. What are you pranked out for like this?' she asked, addressing Lucy.

'I am going to sup with Mistress Ratcliffe. You needn't look so cross. I sha'n't trouble you long. I am going to Court with my Lady Pembroke, and I may never darken your doors again.'

'You'll get into mischief like your sister before you, I'll warrant, and if you do, don't come back here, for I'll shut the door in your face, as sure as my name is Anne Forrester.'

'Have no fear,' Lucy said. 'I am away now by the path across the hills.'

'Nay, Lucy!' Mary exclaimed. 'Nay, by the highway is best. The hill path is lonesome. Stay, Lucy.'

But Lucy was gone, and Mary, looking after her retreating figure, could not gainsay Mistress Forrester, as she said, —

'Wilful, headstrong little baggage, she will rue her behaviour some fine day, as you have done.'

'Mother,' Mary Gifford said, in a troubled voice, 'do not be for ever reproaching me in the hearing of others, it is cruel. It may be better for you and for me if I leave my father's house, and seek some humble refuge with my boy.'

But this did not suit Mistress Forrester's views. Mary Gifford was far too useful to her. She could write, and manage the accounts of the farm; she could, by a few calm words, effect more with lazy or careless serving men and maids than their mistress did by scolding and reproofs, often accompanied with a box on the ear or a sharp blow across the shoulder to enforce what she said.

It would not answer Mistress Forrester's purpose to let Mary Gifford go, so she said, —

'Hoity, toity! don't talk like that. It's folly to say you will leave a good home when you have no home to go to. Bide here, and let bygones be bygones. I am ready to be friendly if you'll let me. I must away now to see about the two sick lambs; it's all along of the shepherd's ill treatment of the ewe that I am like to lose 'em.'

Mistress Forrester bustled away, and Mary Gifford was left with Ambrose, who was making a hobbyhorse of a thick stick, scampering up and down, and calling out, —

'Gee-up, Hero! I'm off to the fight with Mr Sidney.'

Mary looked at the boy with a strange, wistful smile.

'Poor child!' she murmured, 'poor child! he hath no young comrades with whom to make merry. It is well he can be so jocund and happy. It is true what Mistress Gifford saith, I have no home, and I must bide quietly here, for the boy is safe, and who can tell to what danger I might not expose him if I ventured forth with him into the world again.'

Lucy Forrester went gaily across the open ground, fearless of any danger from horned cattle, of which there were several feeding on the short sweet grass.

She sang as she went, out of the gladness of her heart; triumph, too, mingled with the gladness.

How surprised Mistress Ratcliffe would be to hear she was to be a waiting-woman to my lady the Countess of Pembroke. George had thought of asking his mother to take her to London. Humphrey had spoken of a corner being found for her. Now, what did it matter whether Mistress Ratcliffe consented or not to her son's desire. She had no need to be beholden to her. She would be lodged in a grand house, and have a place with the ladies of the Countess's household.

Remembering how Mistress Ratcliffe had often looked down upon her and Mary, it was a keen delight to her to feel how chagrined she would be at her unexpected good fortune.

It was not absolutely settled yet, but she was sure Mary would give consent, and, on the morrow, after service in the church, she would be admitted to the grand house at Penshurst, and see the Countess herself, and perhaps Mr Philip Sidney.

Perched on a stile to rest, Lucy indulged in a prolonged meditation on the fair prospect which had so unexpectedly opened before her. Of course Mary would make no real objection. No one ever did resist Mr Philip Sidney's will, and it was he had proposed the scheme, and he wished her to be one of his sister's waiting-women.

This gave the poor, little fluttering heart the most intense pleasure, which she could scarcely dare to acknowledge, even to herself. Still, had not Mr Sidney come to offer the coveted place to her — come himself? And had he not beamed on her with his beautiful smile? Yes, and with admiring eyes!

How long Lucy might have indulged in these thoughts it is impossible to say, had she not been suddenly conscious that she was not alone.

Stealthy footsteps were heard approaching from behind, and, turning her head, she saw a tall man, wearing a long cloak, much the worse for wear, and a hat, with neither band nor feather, pulled down over his eyes.

Lucy started, and jumped from the stile, her heart beating violently, and her face, which a few moments before had been radiant with pleasure, pale and frightened.

'Whither away, little maiden; why so scared?' the man said. 'I mean no harm. See!' he said, taking a rosary from under his cloak, 'see, I kiss the blessed cross, in token that you need not fear. I am a poor Catholic, hiding from persecutors, wandering about and living in dens and caves of the earth.'

Lucy had, in her short life, heard nothing but condemnation of Papists. When she thought of them at all, it was with horror, and her knees trembled under her, and her voice was scarcely audible as she said, —

'Prithee, sir, suffer me to pass.'

'On one condition. You know a house called Ford Place?'

'Ay, sir, I do; and I will run back thither and —'

'You will *not* do so, little maiden; you will tell me how it fares with a gentlewoman there, called Mary Gifford?'

'She is well, sir; she is —'

'Hearken! She has a boy named Ambrose. I would fain see him. Bring him hither to me, and I will call on all the saints to bless you. Our Lady shall watch over you and grant you your heart's desire.'

'I cannot do it, sir; I dare not! Let me pass. If you would fain see the boy, go to the house.'

'And be seized and taken off before the grand folk down yonder and imprisoned, and, it may be, tortured. Hearken,' he went on, bringing his face unpleasantly near Lucy's, 'hearken, I can call down blessings on you, but I can call down bitter curses also. Your heart's desire shall be denied you, you shall eat the bread of affliction and drink the water of tears, if you betray me. If you keep my secret, and let me see that boy, blessings shall be showered on you; choose now.'

Poor Lucy was but a child, she had scarcely counted out sixteen years. This strange man, with his keen dark eyes gleaming under the black cap and looking as if they read her very soul, seemed to get her into his power. She was faint with terror, and looked round in vain for help, for some one to come who would deliver her from her trouble.

With a cry of delight she sprang again on the topmost rung of the stile, as she saw George Ratcliffe's giant form appearing in the distance on the slope of a rising ground.

The hillside was covered in this part with great hillocks of heather and gorse.

Apparently her persecutor had also caught sight of the approaching figure, for he relaxed his hold on her wrist, which he had seized as she had sprung up on the stile, and, looking back when she had run some distance towards George, she saw that the man had disappeared.

'George! George!' she cried, as he came with great strides towards her, and, to his intense satisfaction, even in his dismay at her apparent distress, threw herself into his arms. 'George! a dreadful man, a Papist, has scared me. He will curse me, George. Oh! it is terrible to be cursed. Save me from him.'

George looked about in bewilderment.

'I see no man. There is no one near, Lucy. I see no one.'

'Did you not see him as you came in sight?'

'Nay, I was thinking only of you, and hoping to meet you on your way. I saw no man, nor did I see you till I had come up yonder rising ground, just as you mounted the stile. Be not so distressed,' George said, 'we will scour the country for the villain, for villain he must be if he is a Papist; but come now with me. My mother is well-pleased that you should sup with us. Oh! Lucy,' George said, with lover-like earnestness, 'smile again, I pray you, it goes to my heart to see you thus scared, though without reason, I trust. Will it please you to stay here, while I go and unearth the wretch, and belabour him till there is no breath left in him.'

'No, no, George, don't leave me. I should fear to be left alone. Don't, don't leave me.'

George was only too willing to remain, and presently Lucy grew calmer, and they walked slowly across the heath together.

George was too happy for many words, and scarcely heeding even Lucy's account of her adventure, in the bliss of having her clinging to his arm, and the memory of that moment when she threw herself upon him for protection and safety.

'What can he want with Ambrose, Mary's child? He tried to make me promise to bring him to that spot, that he might see him. What can it mean? It will frighten Mary when I tell her, for she is ever dismayed if the child is long-out of her sight. What can it mean?'

'I cannot say,' George replied, dreamily. 'Thank God you are safe. That man is some agent of the devil, but I will put Humphrey on the scent, and we will track him out. I have heard there is a nest of Papists hiding in Tunbridge. Doubtless he is one. Forget him now, Lucy; forget him, and be happy.'

'He gripped my wrist so hard,' Lucy said, holding up her little hand like a child for pity.

It is small wonder that George treated her as a child, and, taking the little hand in his, pressed a fervent kiss upon it.

This seemed to recall Lucy from her clinging, softened mood. She sprang away from George with heightened colour, and said, with all her old brightness, —

'I have news for you. I am going to London to see the tourney, and I am to be one of my Lady of Pembroke's waiting-women. Isn't that grand news?'

Poor George! his dream of bliss was over now.

'Going away! – for how long a space?' he exclaimed.

'Ah! that I cannot tell you, for more weeks or months than I can count, may be.'

George, who had with Humphrey done his utmost to persuade their mother to consent to take Lucy with her, in the event of her going to London, without success, or, rather, without a distinct promise that she would do so, was fairly bewildered.

'How did it come about?' he asked.

'Oh! that is a question, indeed, Master Ratcliffe. There is someone you know of who can bring about what he wishes. It is he who has commended me to my Lady Pembroke, hearing, it may be, from your brother, that I wished to see the tourney, and the Queen, and all the fine doings. Mr Sidney came himself to offer the place of waiting-woman to me.'

'Came himself!' George exclaimed.

'And, prithee, why not; am I beneath his notice as I am beneath your mother's? It seems not.'

George had not time to reply, for, on the square of turf before the house, Mistress Ratcliffe and her niece, Dorothy Ratcliffe, were apparently awaiting their arrival.

'You are late, George, as is your wont,' his mother said. 'Doll must make you more mindful of the fixed time for meals. Is this young woman Mistress Forrester's daughter? I bid you kindly welcome.'

'I thank you, madam,' Lucy said. 'I have seen you many a time, and, methinks, you must have seen me; but, doubtless, I was not like to be remembered by such as you and Mistress Dorothy.'

This little thrust passed unnoticed. Mistress Ratcliffe merely said, —

'George, lead your cousin Doll to the hall, for supper is served. Mistress Lucy, will you permit me to take your hand?'

Lucy made another curtsy, as George, with a rueful face, obeyed his mother and handed his cousin up the stone steps to the porch, his mother and Lucy following.

Mistress Ratcliffe was attired in her best gown, with a long-pointed waist and tight sleeves slashed with purple. Her ruff rivalled the Queen's in thickness and height; and the heavy folds of her lute-string skirt were held out by a wide hoop, which occupied the somewhat narrow doorway as they entered the hall.

Lucy was more than usually hungry, and did full justice to the pasties and conserves of apples which graced the board. As she looked at Dorothy Ratcliffe her heart swelled with triumph, for she was not slow to notice that the household below the salt cast admiring glances at her, and that Dorothy attracted no attention.

George's spirits had sunk below their accustomed level, and his mother sharply reproved him for inattention to his cousin.

'You are ill performing the duties of a host, George. See, Doll's trencher is empty, and the grace-cup is standing by your elbow unheeded. Are you dreaming, George, or half-asleep?'

'I crave pardon, mother,' George said, with a great effort rousing himself. 'Now then, cousin Doll, let me carve you a second portion of the pasty; or, mayhap, the wing of this roast pullet will suit your dainty appetite better.'

Dorothy pouted.

'I have not such vulgar appetites as some folk. Nay, I thank you, cousin, I will but taste a little whipped cream with a sweet biscuit.'

George piled up a mountain of frothy cream on one of the silver plates, which were the pride and glory of his mother. The wooden trenchers were used for the heavier viands; but these silver plates were brought out in honour of guests, for the sweets or fruit which always came at the conclusion of the repast.

These silver plates were kept brightly burnished, and Lucy, as she saw herself reflected in hers, said, laughing, —

'It is pleasant to eat off mirrors – that is to say when what we see there is pleasant.'

Madam Ratcliffe, although full of satisfaction to have her 'household gods' admired, concealed it, and said, with an inclination of her head towards Dorothy, —

'It is no novel thing for you to eat off silver, but I dare to say it is the first time Mistress Lucy has done so.'

'That may be true, madam,' Lucy said – she was never at a loss for a rejoinder – 'but, methinks, I shall soon eat off silver every day an' I choose to do it.'

'How so?' asked Mistress Ratcliffe; but the moment the question was asked, she repented showing any curiosity about it, and made a diversion to prevent a reply by suddenly breaking into admiration of the lace which trimmed Dorothy Ratcliffe's bodice.

'It is Flemish point, sure; and did it not descend to you, Doll, from your grandmother? I have a passion for old lace; and these sapphires of your brooch are of fine water. Now, shall we repair to the parlour, and you, Dorothy, will discourse some sweet music on your mandoline.'

The parlour was a dark room, with oak panels, and a heavy beam across the ceiling. The floor was polished oak, which was slippery to unwary feet. The open fireplace was filled by a large beau-pot filled with a posy of flowing shrubs and long grass and rushes.

Rushes were strewn on the raised floor of the square bay window. A spinning-wheel stood there, and the stool of carved oak, where Mistress Ratcliffe sat when at her work, that she might have an eye to any who came in at the gate, and perhaps catch one of the serving-maids gossiping with a passer-by.

There was a settle in one corner of the parlour, and a cupboard with shelves in a recess in the thick wall. Here the silver was kept, and some curious old figures which had been, like the plate, handed down from the ancestors of whom Mistress Ratcliffe was so proud.

In another recess were a few books, in heavy vellum bindings – Tyndale's translation of the Bible, with silver clasps; and some dull sermons, roughly bound, with an early edition of the Boke of Chess; the prayer-book of Edward the Sixth, and some smaller and insignificant volumes, completed Mistress Ratcliffe's library.

Mistress Ratcliffe did not concern herself with the awakening life of these remarkable times in literature and culture.

It was nothing to her that numerous poets and authors, from Edmund Spenser to many humbler craftsmen of the pen, were busy translating from the Italian the tales of Boccaccio, or the Latin of Virgil.

The horizon had not yet widened to the small landed proprietors of these days, and education, as we understand the word, was confined to the few, and had not reached the people to whom the concerns of everyday life were all-important. Women like Mistress Ratcliffe could often scarcely write their own names, and read slowly and with difficulty the psalms in their prayer-book, or the lessons of the Church in their Bible.

Spelling was eccentric, even in the highest circles, as many letters still preserved in family archives prove, and was made to suit the ear and eye of the writer, without reference to rule or form.

The evening passed somewhat slowly. There was an evident restraint upon every one present.

Dorothy's performance on the mandoline did not elicit much praise, except from Mistress Ratcliffe, who was annoyed that George should seat himself on the settle, by Lucy's side, and encourage her to talk, instead of listening while his cousin sang a melancholy ditty, in anything but a musical voice.

When Dorothy had finished, she laid down the mandoline in a pet, and yawning, said, —

'I am weary after my long ride from Tunbridge, Aunt Ratcliffe. I pray you forgive me if I retire early to bed.'

'Nay, Doll, you must have a cup of spiced wine ere you go, we cannot spare you yet.'

'It is plain I am not wanted, so I can well be spared,' was the reply, with a disagreeable laugh and a jerk of the head in the direction of the settle.

Lucy now sprang up, saying, —

'I, too, must crave leave to bid you good evening, Mistress Ratcliffe. I have to settle plans with my sister before I sleep to-night, and the evening shadows are falling.'

'If you must leave us, Mistress Forrester,' Mistress Ratcliffe said stiffly, 'I may as well inform you, with regret, that the plan proposed by my sons for asking you to bear me company to London in a useful capacity, cannot be fulfilled. I take my niece with me, and two serving-men on the second horse, hence —'

'Oh! madam,' Lucy said, 'there is no need of excusations. I go to London in the next week as waiting-woman to my lady the Countess of Pembroke. It may be that I shall see you there, and I shall be sure to know you and Mistress Dorothy, and make you my proper reverence, even if you have forgotten me.'

'The impudent little hussy!' Mistress Ratcliffe murmured, but she retained her feelings, and said, —

'It is fortunate for you, Mistress Forrester, that you will be under due control in London, for in good sooth you will need it. If you must go, good evening.'

Lucy turned at the door and made a profound curtsy, then, drawing her kerchief closer to her throat, she left the room, George following.

'I don't set much store by Mistress Forrester's manner, Aunt Ratcliffe,' Dorothy said; 'an ill-bred country child, who, of course, is ignorant, so we will pardon her.'

'Ignorant, yes,' Mistress Ratcliffe said, 'but her pretty face.'

'Pretty!' Dorothy screamed, 'Pretty! Nay, aunt, you cannot call that baby-faced chit pretty. No air; no breeding; mere dairymaid's beauty. It makes me laugh to think how proud she was of her fine gown and cap, which only showed her awkward gait the more.' And Mistress Dorothy fingered her Flemish lace and the string of beads round her short, thick neck, with profound belief in her own charms.

If Lucy's beauty was that of a milkmaid, Dorothy's was decidedly of a different character. Her complexion was sallow and pale; her hair, which was by no means abundant, was of the sandy hue,

which she tried to persuade herself was like the Queen's. Her eyes were of a greenish colour, and deeply set under a heavy forehead, and her figure was angular and ungraceful.

Fine feathers do not always make a fine bird, and Dorothy Ratcliffe, although with what in those days was considered to be a fortune at her back, did not find fervent suitors for her favour. She was, therefore, very ready to fall in with Mistress Ratcliffe's wishes, and take pains to ingratiate herself with George, failing Humphrey, whose position as one of Mr Sidney's esquires, made him the more desirable of the two brothers.

Dorothy Ratcliffe was the child of George's uncle, who was a recluse living at Tunbridge. He was a scholar and a pedant, and concerned himself but little about his only child, whose fortune was inherited from her mother.

Marriages in those days were generally settled for the people principally concerned, with or without their consent, as it happened, and Master Ratcliffe and George's mother had a sort of tacit understanding with each other that Dorothy should take herself and her fortune to Hillbrow Place.

Dorothy was not unwilling to find herself mistress there, but she had always a lingering hope that Humphrey would at last be a victim to her charms, and then it would be easy to throw George over.

But things did not look very promising, and Dorothy asked, in an irritable tone, before she parted with her aunt for the night, —

'Is Humphrey so taken up with the grand folk that he cannot find the time to pay his dutiful respects to you, aunt?'

'He was here late the last evening,' Mistress Ratcliffe said, 'and is, with George, anxious to furnish Mr Sidney with the pick of the horses in the stable. Humphrey can scarce stir from Mr Sidney.'

'So it seems,' Dorothy said. 'Methinks, where there's a will there's a way; but we shall have his company in London.'

'Yes, and George's also. You will favour my poor boy's suit, Doll.'

'Your poor boy! nay, aunt, he is not worthy of pity, when he wins favour from a peerless beauty like Mistress Forrester. But let be, it will not break my heart if he gives you this fair country maid for your daughter, who has not — so I have heard — so much as a brass farthing to call her own.'

Deeply chagrined, and with an uneasy suspicion that Dorothy might be right in what she said, Mistress Ratcliffe left her niece to repose, saying to herself, 'She has a tongue and a temper of her own, but we will soon tame her when we get her here.'

CHAPTER IV

THE HAWK AND THE BIRD

'So doth the fox the lamb destroy we see,
The lion fierce, the beaver, roe or gray,
The hawk the fowl, the greater wrong the less,
The lofty proud the lowly poor oppress.'

John Davies, 1613.

When George left Lucy at the door of Ford Place, she ran quickly through the kitchen, where Mistress Forrester was resting on the settle after the labours of the day.

Things had not gone well with the sick lambs, both were dead, and one of the cart-horses had gone lame, and the eggs of the pea-hen were addled.

These circumstances were not likely to sweeten Mistress Forrester's temper, and Lucy, who never bore malice, received a sharp answer in reply to her inquiries as to the condition of the lambs.

'They are dead, and much you care, flaunting off with your lover instead of turning your hand to help at home.'

'I could not have saved the lambs' lives,' Lucy said, 'but I am sorry they are dead. I am sorry when any creature dies.'

'I dare say! Be off to bed, for I am locking up in a minute.'

'Where is Mary?' Lucy asked.

'A-bed. That boy has cut his little finger, or some such thing. Lor!' she was like to swoon with terror when she saw the blood; the child himself was not such a coward.'

Lucy hastened upstairs, and found Mary by the window in her favourite seat. A book lay open on her knee, and, when Lucy came in, she held up her hand, and, pointing to the bed, said, —

'Hush! he is asleep.'

'What has happened?' Lucy said. 'Is the boy hurt?'

'He cut his hand with an old knife, and the blood poured forth. Oh, Lucy, if aught were to befall him, I scarce dare think of what would become of me.'

Lucy thought of the strange encounter she had had with the man on the hill path, and wondered whether it were kind to raise her sister's fears about Ambrose.

'Come and sit by me, sweetheart,' Mary said, making room for her sister on the deep window seat. 'I am troubled to-night with a shadow of coming grief. Sure I have had enough, and I am young yet. Twenty-five is young, though I dare to say I seem old to you, little sister. I am perplexed in mind, and tossed about with doubt. Can you think of me as a merry, light-hearted maiden, donning my smartest gown to go at Lady Mary's bidding to the Park, where great festivities were held in honour of the Queen's visit? Ah, child, it was then soft words and flattery turned my head, and I – well, I have rued it to this hour. Thus, dear Lucy, when I think of your going forth in my Lady Pembroke's train, I fear for you. I will pray also, and pray God may watch over you.'

'Then I may go,' Lucy said. 'I may really go. Oh, Mary, Mary, I am so happy!'

Then, remembering her encounter with the stranger she said, —

'I met a man on the hill path as I went to Hillbrow. He scared me a little bit, but George Ratcliffe came up, and he made off and like a ghost vanished.'

'A man!' Mary exclaimed, in a low voice of suppressed fear. 'What man?'

'He was clad in a long cloak, with a cap pulled over his brow. He had evil eyes – dark, piercing eyes.'

Mary Gifford's clasp of her young sister tightened convulsively, and her heart throbbed so that Lucy could feel it as she pressed her closer and closer.

'What did he say to you, this strange man?'

'He said he would fain see little Ambrose, and bid me bring him to the stile where he met me, that he might look at him. He said he would call a curse down on me if I refused. He looked dreadful as he spoke. And then George came. But, Mary –'

For Mary had sprung to her feet, and, with hands clasped and eyes dilated with terror, she stood like one struck down by some sudden blow.

'Promise, swear, Lucy, you will never take the child outside the fence on the hill side. Swear, Lucy.'

Lucy was frightened by her sister's vehemence, and said, —

'Yes, I promise. Oh, Mary, do not look like that. Do you know the man?'

'Know him! know him! Nay. How should I?' Then she said, after a pause, 'Hush! we shall wake the boy. Let us talk no more to-night. Go to your bed, child; it is late, and to-morrow – yes, to-morrow is Sunday – I will go down with you to the church, and await my Lady Pembroke by the lych gate, and you shall have your desire, and God keep you, and bless you.'

Lucy quickly recovered her spirits; her heart was too full of delighted anticipation to have room for any prolonged fear about her sister, though her pale, terror-struck face, seen in the twilight, and her agonised appeal to her to swear what she asked, made her say, as she lay down on her low truckle bed in the little attic chamber next her sister's, —

'Sure Mary must know something of that man. Perhaps he was a boon companion of her wicked husband. Ah, me! it would be a different world if all men were brave and good and noble like –'

Before the name had taken shape on her lips, Lucy was asleep, and in her dreams there were no dark strangers with cruel black eyes and sinister smiles, but goodly knights, in glistening armour, riding out against their adversaries, and goodlier and nobler than the rest, before whose lance all others fell, while the air rang with the shouts of victory, was Mr Philip Sidney.

Sunday morning dawned fair and bright. The bells of Penshurst church were chiming for matins, when Mary Gifford, leading her boy by the hand, stood with Lucy under the elm tree by the timbered houses by the lych gate, returning the kindly greetings of many neighbours and acquaintances.

Overhead the great boughs of the elm tree were quivering in the soft breeze. The buds, scarcely yet unfolded into leaf, were veiled with tender green, while a sheaf of twigs on the trunk were clothed in emerald, in advance of the elder branches, and making the sombre bole alive with beauty, as the sunbeams sought them out, and cast their tiny, flickering shadows on the ground.

The village people always waited in the churchyard, or by the lych gate till the household from the castle came through the door leading from the Park to the church, and this morning their appearance was looked forward to with more than usual interest. Not only was Lady Mary expected, but the Countess of Pembroke and her ladies, with Mr Sidney, and his young brothers, Robert and Thomas, were known to be of the party.

Sir Henry Sidney was seldom able to leave Ludlow for a peaceful sojourn in his beautiful home, and Lady Mary had sometimes to make the journey from Wales without him, to see that all things in the house were well ordered, and to do her best to make the scanty income stretch out to meet the necessary claims upon it.

When two of the gentlemen in attendance came to the gate to hold it open for the ladies of the party to pass, the throng assembled in the churchyard moved up near the porch, and, as Lady Mary came in sight, curtsies from the women and reverences from the men testified to the esteem in which she was held.

Lady Pembroke came next, smiling and gracious. On her sweet face were no lines of the care which marked her mother's, and she looked what she was, a happy wife and mother.

By her side was Mr Philip Sidney, closely followed by Robert and Thomas, who imitated his courteous bearing, and doffed their caps and bowed their heads in acknowledgment of their people's greeting.

The Sidneys were lords of Penshurst in every sense, and the loyalty of their tenants and dependants was unquestioned. It is not too much to say that Philip Sidney was regarded with admiration and respect, seldom equalled, by these simple people in the Kentish village, who felt a right in him, and a pride, which was perhaps sweeter to him than all the adulation he won in Elizabeth's Court.

When the Sidneys' large pew was filled with its occupants, the bell stopped, and the rest of the congregation hastened to fill the benches in the body of the church.

The service was conducted after the Anglican form of worship, but differed in some respects from that of the present day. The Puritans of those times were making every effort to get rid of what, in their eyes, were useless forms and ceremonies, and in many places in England dissension was rife, and the dread of Popish innovations, or rather a return to Popish practices, was mingled with fierce hatred of Papists, and apprehension of their designs against the life of the Queen.

The Sidneys were staunch adherents of the reformed faith, and Philip Sidney was the staunchest of all. He could never forget the atrocities of that summer night in Paris, when the treachery of the king and his mother resulted in the massacre of innocent men and women, whose only crime was their devotion to the faith for which they died.

Philip Sidney had, as we know, protested with bold sincerity against the Queen's marriage with the Duke of Anjou, urging the danger to the Protestant cause in England, if the Queen should persist in her determination.

Now several years had passed, and he had regained Elizabeth's favour, and had withdrawn his opposition.

The French Ambassadors, who were to arrive in England in the following week, were to be entertained with grand feasts and games, in which he and his chief friend, Fulke Greville, were to take a leading part.

Perhaps no one in that congregation knew or dreamed that their ideal knight, as he stood up in his place amongst them, with his thoughtful face turned towards the nave of the church, had his heart filled with misgivings as to the part he had taken in this matter, and with still deeper misgivings as to the position in which he found himself with the only woman whom he loved and worshipped.

While the good clergyman was preaching a somewhat dull sermon from the words, 'Fear God, honour the King,' following the particular line acceptable in those days, by enforcing loyalty and devotion to the reigning sovereign as the whole duty of man, Philip, leaning back in his seat, his head thrown back, and that wistful, far-away look in his eyes, which enhanced their charm, was all unconscious of what was passing around him, so absorbed was he with his own thoughts.

He roused himself when the first words of a psalm were sung by the village choir in Sternhold and Hopkins' version, and bending over the book, which his sister Mary had opened, pointing her finger to the first line, he raised his musical voice and sang with her the rugged lines which called upon 'All people that on earth do dwell, to sing to the Lord with cheerful voice.'

Then the clergyman pronounced the blessing, and the congregation dispersed, the village people to their homes, the Sidneys towards the gate leading into the pleasance, which lay on the side of the house nearest to the church.

Mary Gifford held back, in spite of Lucy's entreaties to her to go forward.

'They will all have passed in, Mary,' she exclaimed in an agony of excitement. 'Were we not bidden to see the Countess by Mr Sidney himself.'

But Mary was always modest and retiring, and she stood with Ambrose and her sister awaiting a summons.

It came at last. Humphrey Ratcliffe was at her side, saying, —

'My Lady of Pembroke would fain speak with Lucy. Come forward with me.'

As they followed Humphrey through the gateway in the wall, Lucy could scarcely conceal her agitation.

What should she say? What if Lady Pembroke thought her too young and too ignorant? She had pictured to herself that Mr Sidney would himself have led her to his sister, but he was gone out of sight, and she heard one of the gentlemen say to Humphrey, —

'Sir Fulke Greville has arrived with a message from the Queen. Mr Sidney has gone round to meet him.'

'Ill news, I wonder?' Humphrey said.

'Nay, only some trifle about the tourney, belike a change in the colour of the armour, or some such folly.'

Mary and her little son and Lucy were now standing at the end of the terrace walk of smooth turf, which is raised some feet above the wide pleasance below.

'Await the Countess's pleasure here,' Humphrey said. 'She is engaged in talk with Lady Mary, she will send to summon you when she sees fit.'

The ladies and gentlemen in attendance on Lady Mary Sidney and her daughter were threading the narrow paths of the pleasance and chatting gaily with each other, the bright dresses of the ladies, rivalling the colour of the spring flowers in the beds, while the jewelled hilts of the gentlemen's swords sparkled in the sunshine.

From the trees in the Park came the monotonous note of the unseen cuckoo, while the thrushes and blackbirds every now and then sent forth a burst of song, though it was nearly high noontide, when the birds are often silent, as if, in the general rejoicing of the spring, all living things must take part.

The picturesque side of the home of the Sidneys, which faces this pleasance, was in shadow, and made a background to the gay scene, which accentuated the brilliant effect of the gay throng below it.

On the terrace Mary Gifford stood in her black garments, relieved by a long white veil, holding her impatient boy by the hand, while Lucy, no less impatient, was hoping every minute that she should receive a message from Lady Pembroke. The group at last caught the attention of Lady Mary, who had been in earnest conversation with her daughter.

'Ah! there is Mistress Gifford,' she exclaimed, 'and the little sister of whom Philip spoke as suitable to be one of your waiting-women. Let us hasten to speak with them. They have been, I fear, waiting too long.'

'Yes; it was heedless of me to forget them; but there is the bell sounding for dinner in the hall, shall we not bid them sit down at the board? They must needs be weary after their long walk, and the service, to say naught of the sermon,' Lady Pembroke added, laughing.

'Hush, then; I see the good minister coming towards us. He means well, and is a godly man.'

'I do not doubt it, sweet mother; but let us mount the steps to the terrace, and show some courtesy to those waiting our pleasure there.'

'They are coming towards us, Mary. Mary!' Lucy exclaimed, 'come forward and meet them.'

'Yes, mother,' Ambrose said fretfully, dragging at his mother's hand. 'I thought I was to see Mr Sidney, and that he would let me ride again. I am so weary and so hungry.'

Lady Pembroke soon tripped up the stone steps, Lady Mary following more slowly. Lady Pembroke had all the graceful courtesy which distinguished her brother; and that high-bred manner which, quite apart from anything like patronage, always sets those who may be on a lower rung of the social ladder at ease in casual intercourse.

There are many who aspire to be thought 'aristocratic' in their manners, and who may very successfully imitate the dress and surroundings of the old noblesse. But this gift, which showed so conspicuously in the family of the Sidneys, is an inheritance, and cannot be really copied. It is so easy to patronise from a lofty vantage ground, so difficult to make those below it feel that the distance is not thought of as an impassable gulf, but is bridged over by the true politeness which lies not on the

surface, but has its root deep in the consideration for others, which finds expression in forgetfulness of self, and in remembering the feelings and tastes of those with whom we are brought in contact.

Like the mists of morning under the warm beams of the sun, Mary Gifford's restraint and shy reserve vanished when Lady Pembroke exclaimed, —

'Ah, here is the little knight that Philip told me of. See, mother, he must be a playfellow for your Thomas.'

Lady Mary was somewhat breathless. She could not climb the steep, stone stairs as quickly as her daughter.

'Mistress Gifford must stay and dine with us, Mary, and then Thomas shall show him the pictures in the new book Philip has brought him from London.'

'Are there pictures of horses and knights, madam?' Ambrose asked.

'They are Bible pictures, boy, but there are warriors amongst them, doubtless — Joshua and Samson, and, it may be, others.'

The big bell which, to this day, is heard far and near at Penshurst, was still making its loud, sonorous clang, and Lady Mary, taking Ambrose by the hand led him along the terrace, his mother at the other side, and Lucy following with Lady Pembroke.

Instead of immediately beginning to discuss the probability of Lucy's being placed in her household, Lady Pembroke said, —

'I have not seen you for some time. You have grown apace since my marriage. Yet my brother, when he spoke of you, called you Mistress Gifford's little sister. You are taller than I am, methinks.'

Lucy's face glowed with pleasure, as Lady Pembroke said this.

'And most like you have yet to grow a few inches.'

'Nay, madam; I am near sixteen.'

'And is sixteen too old to grow? I think not. It is the age to grow in wisdom as well as in stature.'

'I would fain grow in the first, madam,' Lucy said, 'if only to please Mary, who is so good to me — my only friend.'

'I forgot you have no mother, poor child.'

'Nay, madam; only a cross-grained stepmother. Mary bears her quips and cranks like a saint. I cannot do so.'

'It is well to try to bear what you term quips and cranks. But we must repair to the hall now,' Lady Pembroke said; and then, addressing a gentlewoman who was standing at the lower end of the long table, she said, 'Mistress Crawley, be so good as to make room for Mistress Lucy Forrester at your side. She dines here to-day with Mistress Gifford.'

Mary already had her place pointed out to her, a little higher up the board with Ambrose; and the Countess of Pembroke, with a smile, said, as she passed to the gentleman who presided, —

'See that the young knight has sweet things enough to please his palate; and be sure, Master Pearson, that Mistress Gifford is well attended by the serving-men.'

The family and principal guests sat at the upper end of the hall, and amongst them was Mr Sidney's lifelong friend, Sir Fulke Greville.

There was a few moments' silence, when the chaplain, raising his hand, said a Latin grace; and then there was a clatter of trenchers, and the quick passing to and fro of the serving-men, and the sound of many voices as the meal proceeded.

That hospitable board of the Sidneys was always well spread, and to-day, at the upper end, Lady Mary had provided the best of viands for the entertainment of her daughter, and of her favourite son and his friend.

Lady Mary's face was shining with motherly pride as she looked at Philip and her fair daughter, who joined with keen delight in the conversation in which the two friends took the lead — her quick and ready appreciation of the subjects under discussion winning a smile from her brother, who continually referred to her, if on any point he and his friend held different opinions. Indeed, the Countess of

Pembroke was not far behind her brother in intellectual gifts. The French and Italian literature, in which he delighted, were familiar to her also; and the *Divina Commedia* and the *Vita Nuova* were, we may well believe, amongst her favourite works. The great Poet of the Unseen must have had an especial charm for the lovers of literature in those times of awakening.

The mystic and allegorical style, the quaint and grotesque imagery in which Dante delighted, must have touched an answering chord in the hearts of scholars like Philip Sidney and the Countess of Pembroke.

That Philip Sidney was deeply versed in the story of Beatrice – following her with devout admiration, as her lover showed her in her girlish beauty, and then in her matured and gracious womanhood – we may safely conclude.

At the time of which we write, he was making a gallant fight against defeat, in the struggle between love and duty, striving to keep the absorbing passion for his Stella within the bounds which the laws of honour and chivalry demanded, at whatever cost. No one can read the later stanzas, which are amongst the most beautiful in *Stella and Astrophel*, without feeling that, deep as was his love, his sense of honour was deeper still.

Nor is it unreasonable to feel that, as he followed the great Master through those mysterious realms, guided by the lady of his love, pure and free from the fetters of earthly passion, Philip Sidney would long with unutterable longing that his love might be also as wings to bear him heavenward, like that of Dante for his Beatrice, whose name is for all time immortal like his own.

When the grace was said, the company at the upper end of the great hall rose, and left it by the staircase which led to the private apartments of the spacious house.

The ladies passed out first, and the Countess of Pembroke, turning at the foot of the stairs, said, —

'Mistress Crawley, bid Lucy Forrester to follow us with Mistress Gifford and the boy.'

But Lucy was thinking more of Mr Philip Sidney than of her summons to attend his sister. She was hoping for a smile from him, and felt a thrill of disappointment as he put his arm through Sir Fulke Greville's and turned away to the principal entrance with his friend.

Lucy's eyes followed them, and she was roused from her dream by a sharp tap on her shoulder.

'Did you not hear my lady's order, child? Methinks you will need to mend your manners if you wish to enter her service.'

Lucy's face grew crimson, and she gave Mistress Crawley a look, which, if she had dared, she would have accompanied by a saucy word.

Mary Gifford, who was waiting for her sister, said gently, —

'We are to follow quickly, hasten, Lucy, Mistress Crawley is waiting.'

Lucy tossed her head and did not hurry herself even then. She had many admirers in the neighbourhood besides George Ratcliffe, and one of them said to him, —

'It is a shame if old Mother Crawley has that little beauty as her servant. She will trample on her and make her life a burden to her, or I am mistaken.'

George resented any interference about Lucy from another man, and he greatly objected to hear her called 'a little beauty;' for George's love for her was that of a respectful worshipper at the shrine of a divinity, and he could not brook anything like familiar disrespect in others.

'Mistress Forrester,' he said, 'is likely to win favour wherever she may go, and she will serve the Countess of Pembroke rather than Mistress Crawley.'

A provoking laugh was the answer to this.

'You can know naught of the life of a household like my Lady Pembroke's. The head waiting-woman is supreme, and the underlings are her slaves. They may sit and stitch tapestry till they are half blind, and stoop over the lace pillow till they grow crooked, for all my lady knows about it. Ask Mistress Betty here, she knows what a life Mistress Crawley can lead her slaves.'

The person addressed as Mistress Betty was beginning to answer, when George turned away to go to the stables, where he thought Mr Sidney had probably preceded him with Sir Fulke Greville, to examine the points of the two fresh steeds he had purchased for the tournament. But he could see nothing of Mr Sidney, and, meeting his brother Humphrey, he heard from him that he had walked away down the avenue with Sir Fulke Greville, apparently in earnest conversation, and that they would not care to be disturbed.

George lingered about disconsolately, and at last left the Park and went towards the river, which he knew Mary Gifford and Lucy must cross on their homeward way. At least he would have the chance of mounting guard over Lucy, and be present if the man who had so lightly spoken of her should be so presumptuous as to follow her.

After long waiting, George saw Lucy and her sister and Ambrose coming out of the gateway leading from the Park, and he was well satisfied to see that his brother Humphrey, and no other squire, was in attendance.

Ambrose was tired and a little querulous, and dragged heavily at his mother's hand. Humphrey offered to carry the boy, but he resented that as an indignity, and murmured that he had not seen Mr Sidney, and he wanted to ride his horse again.

'Mr Sidney has other matters on hand than to look after a tired, cross boy,' his mother said. 'Come, my son, quicken your pace somewhat, or we shall not be at home for supper. It was a grand treat for you to be entertained by my Lady Mary's sons, and you should be in high good humour,' she continued.

But poor little Ambrose kept up the same murmured discontent, of which the burden was, —

'I want to ride on Mr Sidney's horse,' and he dragged back more persistently than ever, till his mother's fair face flushed with the exertion of pulling him up the steep hill, over which the low westering sun was casting a glow, which was hot for the time of year.

Humphrey at last settled the matter by lifting Ambrose, in spite of his struggles, upon his shoulders, and saying, —

'You will never be a true knight, boy, like Mr Sidney, if you growl and scold at trifles. Fie, for shame, see how weary you have made your mother.'

'I don't love you,' the child said, 'and I hate to be carried like a babe.'

'Then do not behave as a babe,' Mary said, 'but thank Master Humphrey for his patience and for sparing you the climb uphill. If you love me, Ambrose, be amenable and good.'

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