

Thorne Guy

House of Torment



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House of Torment / A Tale of the Remarkable Adventures of Mr. John Commendone, Gentleman to King Phillip II of Spain at the English Court:

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House of Torment / A Tale of
the Remarkable Adventures
of Mr. John Commendone,
Gentleman to King Phillip II
of Spain at the English Court

CHAPTER I
IN THE QUEEN'S CLOSET;
THE FOUR FACES

Sir Henry Commendone sat upon an oak box clamped with bands of iron and watched his son completing his morning toilette.

"And how like you this life of the Court, John?" he said.

The young man smoothed out the feather of his tall cone-shaped hat. "Truly, father," he answered, "in respect of itself it seems a very good life, but in respect that it is far from the fields and home it is naught. But I like it very well. And I think I am

likely to rise high. I am now attached to the King Consort, by the Queen's pleasure. His Highness has spoken frequently with me, and I have my commission duly written out as *caballerizo*."

"I never could learn Spanish," the elder man replied, wagging his head. "Father Chilches tried to teach me often of an afternoon when you were hawking. What does the word mean in essence?"

"Groom of the body, father – equerry. It is doubtless because I speak Spanish that it hath been given me."

"Very like, Johnnie. But since the Queen, God bless her, has come to the throne, and England is reconciled to Holy Church, thou wert bound to get a post at Court. They could not ignore our name. I wrote to the Bishop of London myself, he placed my request before the Queen's Grace, and hence thou art here and in high favour."

The young man smiled. "Which I shall endeavour to keep," he answered. "And now I must soon go to the Queen's lodging. I am in attendance on King Philip."

"And I to horse with my men at noon and so home to Kent. I am glad to have seen thee, Johnnie, in thy new life, though I do not love London and the Court. But tell me of the Queen's husband. The neighbours will all want news of him. It's little enough they like the Spanish match in Kent. Give me a picture of him."

"I have been at Court a month," John Commendone answered, "and I have learned more than one good lesson. There is a Spanish saying that runs this way, '*Palabras y plumas viento las*'

Heva' (Words and feathers are carried far by the wind). I will tell you, father, but repeat nothing again. Kent is not far away, and I have ambition."

Sir Henry chuckled. "Prudent lad," he said; "thou art born to be about a palace. I'll say nothing."

"Well then, here is your man, a pedant and a fool, a stickler for little trifles, a very child for detail. Her Grace the Queen and all the nobles speak many languages. Every man is learned now. His Highness speaks but Spanish, though he has a little French. Never did I see a man with so small a mind, and yet he thinks he can see deep down into men's hearts and motives, and knows all private and public affairs."

Sir John whistled. He plucked at one of the roses of burnt silver embroidered upon the doublet of green tissue he was wearing – the gala dress which he had put on for his visit to Court, a garment which was a good many years behind the fashion, but thought most elegant by his brother squires in Kent.

"So!" he said, "then this match will prove as bad for the country as all the neighbours are saying. Still, he is a good Catholic, and that is something."

John nodded carelessly. "More so," he replied, "than is thought becoming to his rank and age by many good Catholics about the Court. He is as regular at mass, sermons, and vespers as a monk – hath a leash of friars to preach for his instruction, and disputes in theology with others half the night till Her Grace hath to send one of her gentlemen to bid him come to bed."

"Early days for that," said the Kentish gentleman, "though, in faith, the Queen is thirty-eight and – "

John started. "Whist!" he said. "I'm setting you an evil example, sir. Long ears abound in the Tower. I'll say no more."

"I'm mum, Johnnie," Sir Henry replied. "I'll break in upon thee no more. Get on with thy tale."

"'Tis a bargain then, sir, and repeat nothing I tell you. I was saying about His Highness's religion. He consults Don Diego Deza, a Dominican who is his confessor, most minutely as to all the actions of life, inquiring most anxiously if this or that were likely to burden his conscience. And yet – though Her Grace suspects nothing – he is of a very gross and licentious temper. He hath issued forth at night into the city, disguised, and indulged himself in the common haunts of vice. I much fear me that he will command me to go with him on some such expedition, for he begins to notice me more than any others of the English gentlemen in his company, and to talk with me in the Spanish tongue..."

The elder man laughed tolerantly.

"Every man to his taste," he said; "and look you, Johnnie, a prince is wedded for state reasons, and not for love. The ox hath his bow, the falcon his bells, and as pigeon's bill man hath his desire and would be nibbling!"

John Commendone drew himself up to his full slim height and made a motion of disgust.

"'Tis not my way," he said. "Bachelor, I hunt no fardingales,

nor would I do so wedded."

"God 'ild you, Johnnie. Hast ever taken a clean and commendable view of life, and I love thee for it. But have charity, get you charity as you grow older. His Highness is narrow, you tell me; be not so yourself. Thou art not a little pot and soon hot, but I think thou wilt find a fire that will thaw thee at Court. A young man must get experience. I would not have thee get through the streets with a bragging look nor frequent the stews of town. But young blood must have its May-day. Whilst can, have thy May-day, Johnnie. Have thy door shadowed with green birches, long fennel, St. John's wort, orphine, and white lilies. Wilt not be always young. But I babble; tell me more of King Philip."

The tall youth had stood silent while his father spoke, his grave, oval face set in courteous attention. It was a coarse age. Henry the Eighth was not long dead, and the scandals of his court and life influenced all private conduct. That Queen Mary was rigid in her morals went for very little. The Lady Elizabeth, still a young girl, was already committing herself to a course of life which – despite the historians of the popular textbooks – made her court in after years as licentious as ever her father's had been. Old Sir Henry spoke after his kind, and few young men in 1555 were so fastidious as John Commendone.

He welcomed the change in conversation. To hear his father – whom he dearly loved – speak thus, was most distasteful to him. "His Highness is a glutton for work," the young man went on.

"I see him daily, and he is ever busy with his pen. He hateth to converse upon affairs of state, but will write a letter eighteen pages long when his correspondent is in the next room, howbeit the subject is one which a man of sense would settle in six words of the tongue. Indeed, sir, he is truly of opinion that the world is to move upon protocols and apostilles. Events must not be born without a preparatory course of his obstetrical pedantry! Never will he learn that the world will not rest on its axis while he writeth directions of the way it is to turn."

Sir Henry shook himself like a dog.

"And the Queen mad for such a husband as this!" he said.

"Aye, worships him as it were a saint in a niche. A skilled lutanist with a touch on the strings remarkable for its science, speaking many languages with fluency and grace, Latin in especial, Her Grace yet thinks His Highness a great statesman and of a polished easy wit."

"How blind is love, Johnnie! blinder still when it cometh late. A cap out of fashion and ill-worn. 'Tis like one of your French withered pears. It looks ill and eats dryly."

"I was in the Queen's closet two days gone, in waiting on His Highness. A letter had come from Paris, narrating how a member of the Spanish envoy's suit to that court had been assassinated. The letter ran that the manner in which he had been killed was that a Jacobin monk had given him a pistol-shot in the head – *'la façon que l'on dit qu'il a été tué, sa été par un Jacobin qui luy a donné d'un cou de pistolle dans la taye.'* His Highness took up his

pen and scrawled with it upon the margin. He drew a line under one word '*pistolle*'; 'this is perhaps some kind of knife,' quoth he; 'and as for "*tayte*," it can be nothing else but head, which is not *tayte*, but *tête* or *teyte*, as you very well know.' And, father, the Queen was all smiles and much pleased with this wonderful commentary!"

Sir Henry rose.

"I will hear no more," he said. "It is time I went. You have given me much food for thought. Fare thee well, Johnnie. Write me letters with thy doings when thou canst. God bless thee."

The two men stood side by side, looking at each other in silence, one hale and hearty still, but with his life drawing to its close, the other in the first flush of early manhood, entering upon a career which promised a most brilliant future, with every natural and material advantage, either his already, or at hand.

They were like and yet unlike.

The father was big, burly, iron-grey of head and beard, with hooked nose and firm though simple eyes under thick, shaggy brows.

John was of his father's height, close on six feet. He was slim, but with the leanness of perfect training and condition. Supple as an eel, with a marked grace of carriage and bearing, he nevertheless suggested enormous physical strength. The face was a pure oval with an olive tinge in the skin, the nose hooked like his sire's, the lips curved into a bow, but with a singular graveness and strength overlying and informing their delicacy. The eyes, of

a dark brown, were inscrutable. Steadfast in regard, with a hint of cynicism and mockery in them, they were at the same time instinct with alertness and a certain watchfulness. He seemed, as he stood in his little room in the old palace of the Tower, a singularly handsome, clever, and capable young man, but a man with reservations, with secrets of character which no one could plumb or divine.

He was the only son of Sir Henry Commendone and a Spanish lady of high birth who had come to England in 1512 to take a position in the suite of Catherine of Arragon, three years after her marriage to Henry VIII. During the early part of Henry's reign Sir Henry Commendone was much at Windsor and a personal friend of the King. Those were days of great brilliancy. The King was young, courteous, and affable. His person was handsome, he was continually engaged in martial exercises and all forms of field sports. Sir Henry was one of the band of gay youths who tilted and hawked or hunted in the Great Park. He fell in love with the beautiful young Juanita de Senabria, married her with the consent and approbation of the King and Queen, and immediately retired to his manors in Kent. From that time forward he took absolutely no part in politics or court affairs. He lived the life of a country squire of his day in serene health and happiness. His wife died when John – the only issue of the marriage – was six years old, and the boy was educated by Father Chilches, a placid and easy-going Spanish priest, who acted as domestic chaplain at Commendone. This man, loving ease and

quiet, was nevertheless a scholar and a gentleman. He had been at the court of Charles V, and was an ideal tutor for Johnnie. His religion, though sincere, sat easily upon him. The Divorce from Rome did not draw him from his calm retreat, the oath enforcing the King's supremacy had no terrors for him, and he died at a good old age in 1548, during the protectorate of Somerset.

From this man Johnnie had learnt to speak Spanish, Italian, and French. Naturally quick and intelligent, he had added something of his mother's foreign grace and self-possession to the teachings and worldly-wisdom of Don Chilches, while his father had delighted to train him in all manly exercises, than whom none was more fitted to do.

Sir Henry became rich as the years went on, but lived always as a simple squire. Most of his land was pasturage, then far more profitable than the growing of corn. Tillage, with no knowledge of the rotation of crops, no turnip industry to fatten sheep, miserable appliances and entire ignorance of manures, afforded no interest on capital. But the export of wool and broadcloth was highly profitable, and Sir Henry's wool was paid for in good double ryals by the manufacturers and merchants of the great towns.

John Commendone entered upon his career, therefore, with plenty of money – far more than any one suspected – a handsome person, thoroughly accomplished in all that was necessary for a gentleman of that day.

In addition, his education was better than the general, he was

without vices, and, in the present reign, the consistent Catholicity of his house recommended him most strongly to the Queen and her advisers.

"So God 'ild ye, Johnnie. Come not down the stairs with me. Let us make farewell here and now. I go to the Constable's to leave my duty, and then to take a stirrup-cup with the Lieutenant. My serving-men and horses are waiting at the south of White Tower at Coal Harbour Gate. Farewell."

The old man put his arms in their out-moded bravery round his son and kissed him on both cheeks. He hugged like a bear, and his beard was wiry and strong against the smooth cheeks of his son. Then coughing a little, he almost imperceptibly made the sign of the cross, and, turning, clanked away, his sword ringing on the stone floor and his spurs – for he wore riding-boots of Spanish leather – clicking in unison.

John was left alone.

He sat down upon the low wooden bed and gazed at the chest where the knight had been sitting. The little room, with its single window looking out upon the back offices of the palace, seemed strangely empty, momentarily forlorn. Johnnie sighed. He thought of the woods of Commendone, of the old Tudor house with its masses of chimneys and deep-mullioned windows – of all that home-life so warm and pleasant; dawn in the park with the deer cropping wet, silver grass, the whistle of the wild duck as they flew over the lake, the garden of rosemary, St. John's wort, and French lavender, which had been his mother's.

Then, stifling a sigh, he sprang to his feet, buckled on his sword – the fashionable "whiffle" – shaped weapon with globular pommel and the quillons of the guard ornamented in gold – and gave a glance at a little mirror hung upon the wall. By no means vain, he had a very careful taste in dress, and was already considered something of a dandy by the young men of his set.

He wore a doublet of black satin, slashed with cloth of silver; and black velvet trunks trussed and tagged with the same. His short cloak was of cloth of silver lined with blue velvet pounced with his cypher, and it fell behind him from his left shoulder.

He smoothed his small black moustache – for he wore no beard – set his ruff of two pleats in order, and stepped gaily out of his room into a long panelled corridor, a very proper young man, taut, trim, and *point device*.

There were doors on each side of the corridor, some closed, some ajar. A couple of serving-men were hastening along it with ewers of water and towels. There was a hum and stir down the whole length of the place as the younger gentlemen of the Court made their toilettes.

From one door a high sweet tenor voice shivered out in song

"Filz de Venus, voz deux yeux desbendez
Et mes ecrits lisez et entendez..."

"That's Mr. Ambrose Cholmondely," Johnnie nodded to

himself. "He has a sweet voice. He sang in the sextette with Lady Bedingfield and Lady Paget last night. A sweet voice, but a fool! Any girl – or dame either for that matter – can do what she likes with him. He travels fastest who travels alone. Master Ambrose will not go far, pardieu, nor travel fast!"

He came to the stair-head – it was a narrow, open stairway leading into a small hall, also panelled. On the right of the hall was a wide, open door, through which he turned and entered the common-room of the gentlemen who were lodged in this wing of the palace.

The place was very like the senior common-room of one of the more ancient Oxford colleges, wainscoted in oak, and with large mullioned windows on the side opposite to a high carved fire-place.

A long table ran down the centre, capable of seating thirty or forty people, and at one end was a beaufet or side-board with an almost astonishing array of silver plate, which reflected the sunlight that was pouring into the big, pleasant room in a thousand twinkling points of light.

It was an age of silver. The secretary to Francesco Capella, the Venetian Ambassador to London, writes of the period: "There is no small innkeeper, however poor and humble he may be, who does not serve his table with silver dishes and drinking cups; and no one who has not in his house silver plate to the amount of at least £100 sterling is considered by the English to be a person of any consequence. The most remarkable thing in London is the

quantity of wrought silver."

The gentlemen about the Queen and the King Consort had their own private silver, which was kept in this their common messroom, and was also supplemented from the Household stores.

Johnnie sat down at the table and looked round. At the moment, save for two serving-men and the pantler, he was alone. Before him was the silver plate and goblet he had brought from Commendone, stamped with his crest and motto, "*Sapere aude et tace.*" He was hungry, and his eye fell upon a dish of perch in foyle, one of the many good things upon the table.

The pantler hastened up.

"The carpes of venison are very good this morning, sir," he said confidentially, while one serving-man brought a great piece of manchet bread and another filled Johnnie's flagon with ale.

"I'll try some," he answered, and fell to with a good appetite.

Various young men strolled in and stood about, talking and jesting or whispering news of the Court, calling each other by familiar nicknames, singing and whistling, examining a new sword, cursing the amount of their tailors' bills – as young men have done and will do from the dawn of civilisation to the end.

John finished his breakfast, crossed himself for grace, and, exchanging a remark or two here and there, went out of the room and into the morning sunshine which bathed the old palace of the Tower in splendour.

How fresh the morning air was! how brilliant the scene before

him!

To his right was the Coal Harbour Gate and the huge White Tower. Two Royal standards shook out in the breeze, the Leopards of England and blazoned heraldry of Spain, with its tower of gold upon red for Castile, the red and yellow bars of Arragon, the red and white checkers of Burgundy, and the spread-eagle sable of Sicily.

To the left was that vast range of halls and galleries and gardens which was the old palace, now utterly swept away for ever. The magnificent pile of brick and timber known as the Queen's gallery, which was the actual Royal lodging, was alive and astir with movement. Halberdiers of the guard were stationed at regular distances upon the low stone terrace of the façade, groups of officers went in and out of the doors, already some ladies were walking in the privy garden among the parterres of flowers, brilliant as a window of stained glass. The gilding and painted blazonry on the great hall built by Henry III glowed like huge jewels.

On the gravel sweep before the palace grooms and men-at-arms were holding richly caparisoned horses, and people were continually coming up and riding away, their places to be filled by new arrivals.

It is almost impossible, in our day, to do more than faintly imagine a scene so splendid and so debonair. The clear summer sky, its crushed sapphire unveiled by smoke, the mass of roofs, flat, turreted, embattled – some with stacks of warm, red

chimneys splashed with the jade green of ivy – the cupulars and tall clock towers, the crocketed pinnacles and fantastic timbered gables, made a whole of extraordinary beauty.

Dozens of great gilt vanes rose up into the still, bright air, the gold seeming as if it were cunningly inlaid upon the curve of a blue bowl.

The pigeons cooed softly to each other, the jackdaws wheeled and chuckled round the dizzy heights of the White Tower, there was a sweet scent of wood smoke and flowers borne upon the cool breezes from the Thames.

The clocks beat out the hour of noon, there was the boom of a gun and a white puff of smoke from the Constable Tower, a gay fanfaronade of trumpets shivered out, piercingly sweet and triumphant, a distant bell began to toll somewhere over by St. John's Chapel.

John Commendone entered the great central door of the Queen's gallery.

He passed the guard of halberdiers that stood at the foot of the great staircase, exchanging good mornings with Mr. Champneys, who was in command, and went upwards to the gallery, which was crowded with people. Officers of the Queen's archers, dressed in scarlet and black velvet, with a rose and imperial crown woven in gold upon their doublets, chatted with permanent officials of the household. There was a considerable sprinkling of clergy, and at one end of the gallery, nearest to the door of the Ante-room, was a little knot of Dominican monks, dark

and somewhat saturnine figures, who whispered to each other in liquid Spanish. John went straight to the Ante-room entrance, which was screened by heavy curtains of tapestry. He spoke a word to the officer guarding it with a drawn sword, and was immediately admitted to a long room hung with pictures and lit by large windows all along one side of its length.

Here were more soldiers and several gentlemen ushers with white wands in their hands. One of them had a list of names upon a slip of parchment, which he was checking with a pen. He looked up as John came in.

"Give you good day, Mr. Commendone," he said. "I have you here upon this paper. His Highness is with the Queen in her closet, and you are to be in waiting. Lord Paget has just had audience, and the Bishop of London is to come."

He lowered his voice, speaking confidentially. "Things are coming to a head," he said. "I doubt me but that there will be some savage doings anon. Now, Mr. Commendone, I wish you very well. You are certainly marked out for high preferment. Your cake is dough on both sides. See you keep it. And, above all, give talking a lullaby."

John nodded. He saw that the other knew something. He waited to hear more.

"You have been observed, Mr. Commendone," the other went on, his pointed grey beard rustling on his ruff with a sound as of whispering leaves, and hardly louder than the voice in which he spoke. "You have had those watching you as to your demeanours

and departments whom you did not think. And you have been very well reported of. The King likes you and Her Grace also. They have spoken of you, and you are to be advanced. And if, as I very well think, you will be made privy to affairs of state and policy, pr'ythee remember that I am always at your service, and love you very well."

He took his watch from his doublet. "It is time you were announced," he said, and turning, opened a door opposite the tapestry-hung portal through which Johnnie had entered.

"Mr. Commendone," he said, "His Highness's gentleman."

An officer within called the name down a short passage to a captain who stood in front of the door of the closet. There was a knock, a murmur of voices, and John was beckoned to proceed.

He felt unusually excited, though at the same time quite cool. Old Sir James Clinton at the door had not spoken for nothing. Certainly his prospects were bright... In another moment he had entered the Queen's room and was kneeling upon one knee as the door closed behind him.

The room was large and cheerful. It was panelled throughout, and the wainscoting had been painted a dull purple or liver-colour, with the panel-beadings picked out in gold. The roof was of stone, and waggon-headed with Welsh groins – that is to say, groins which cut into the main arch below the apex. Two long Venice mirrors hung on one wall, and over the fire-place was a crucifix of ivory.

In the centre of the place was a large octagonal table covered

with papers, and a massive silver ink-holder.

Seated at the table, very busy with a mass of documents, was King Philip II of Spain. Don Diego Deza, his confessor and private chaplain, stood by the side of the King's chair.

Seated at another and smaller table in a window embrasure Queen Mary was bending over a large flat book. It was open at an illuminated page, and the sunlight fell upon the gold and vermilion, the *rouge-de-fer* and powder-blue, so that it gleamed like a little *parterre* of jewels.

It was the second time that John Commendone had been admitted to the Privy Closet. He had been in waiting at supper, the Queen had spoken to him once or twice; he was often in the King Consort's lodging, and was already a favourite among the members of the Spanish suite. But this was quite different. He knew it at once. He realised immediately that he was here – present at this "domestic interior," so to speak, for some important purpose. Had he known the expressive idiom of our day, he would have said to himself, "I have arrived!"

Philip looked up. His small, intensely serious eyes gave a gleam of recognition.

"Buenos dias, señor," he said.

John bowed very low.

Suddenly the room was filled with a harsh and hoarse volume of sound, a great booming, resonant voice, like the voice of a strong, rough man.

It came from the Queen.

"Mr. Commendone, come you here. His Highness hath work to do. Art a lutanist, Lady Paget tells me, then look at this new book of tablature with the voice part very well writ and the painting of the initial most skilfully done."

The young man advanced to the Queen. She held out her left hand, a little shrivelled hand, for him to kiss. He did so, and then, rising, bent over the wonderfully illuminated music book.

The six horizontal lines of the lute notation, each named after a corresponding note of the instrument, were drawn in scarlet. The Arabic numerals which indicated the frets to be used in producing the notes were black and orange, the initial H was a wealth of flat heraldic colour.

"His golden locks time hath to filuer turnde"

the Queen read out in her great masculine voice, – a little subdued now, but still fierce and strong, like the purring of a panther. "What think you of my new book of songs, Mr. Commendone?"

"A beautiful book, Madam, and fit for Your Grace's skill, who hath no rival with the lute."

"'Tis kind of you to say so, Mr. Commendone, but you over compliment me."

She bent her brows together, lost in serious thought for a moment, and drummed with lean fingers upon the table.

Suddenly she looked up and her face cleared.

"I can say truly," she continued, "that I am a very skilled player. For a woman I can fairly put myself in the first rank. But I have met others surpassing me greatly."

She had thought it out with perfect fairness, with an almost pedantic precision. Woman-like, she was pleased with what the young courtier had said, but she weighed truth in grains and scruples – tithes of mint and cummin, the very word and article of bald fact; always her way.

"And here, Mr. Commendone," she continued, "is my new virginal. It hath come from Firenze, and was made by Nicolo Pedrini himself. My Lord Mayor begged Our acceptance of it."

The virginal was a fine instrument – spinet it came to be called in Elizabeth's reign, from the spines or crow-quills which were attached to the "jacks" and plucked at the strings.

The case was made of cypress wood, inlaid with whorls of thin silver and enamels of various colours.

"We were pleased at the Lord Mayor's courtesy," the Queen concluded, and the change in pronoun showed John that the interview was over in its personal sense, and that he had been very highly honoured.

He bowed, with a murmur of assent, and drew aside to the wall of the room, waiting easily there, a fresh and gallant figure, for any further commands.

Nor did it escape him that the Queen had given him a look of prim, but quite marked approval – as an old maid may look upon a handsome and well-mannered boy.

The Queen pressed down the levers of the spinet once or twice, and the thin, sweet chords like the ghost of a harp rang out into the room.

John watched her from the wall.

The divine right of monarchs was a doctrine very firmly implanted in his mind by his upbringing and the time in which he lived. The absolutism of Henry VIII had had an extraordinary influence on public thought.

To a man such as John Commendone the monarch of England was rather more than human.

At the same time his cool and clever brain was busily at work, drinking in details, criticising, appraising, wondering.

The Queen wore a robe of claret-coloured velvet, fringed with gold thread and furred with powdered ermine. Over her rather thin hair, already turning very grey, she wore the simple caul of the period, a head-dress which was half bonnet, half skull-cap, made of cloth of tinsel set with pearls.

Small, lean, sickly, painfully near-sighted, yet with an eye full of fierceness and fire – your true Tudor-tiger eye – she was yet singularly feminine. As she sat there, her face wrinkled by care and evil passions even more than by time, touching the keys of her spinet, picking up a piece of embroidery, and frequently glancing at her husband with quick, hungry looks of fretful and even suspicious affection, she was far more woman than queen.

The great booming voice which terrified strong men, coming from this frail and sinister figure, was silent now. There was

pathos even in her attitude. A submissive wife of Philip with her woman's gear.

The King of Spain went on writing, coldly, carefully, and with concentrated attention, and John's eyes fell upon him also, his new master, the most powerful man in the world of that day. King of Spain, Naples, Sicily, Duke of Milan, Lord of Franche Comté and the Netherlands, Ruler of Tunis and the Barbary coast, the Canaries, Cape de Verd Islands, Philippines and Spice Islands, the huge West Indian colonies, and the vast territories of Mexico and Peru – an almost unthinkable power was in the hands of this man.

As it all came to him, Johnnie shuddered for a moment. His nerves were tense, his imagination at work, it seemed difficult to breathe the same air as these two super-normal beings in the still, warm chamber.

From outside came the snarling of trumpets, the stir and noise of soldiery – here, warm silence, the scratching of a pen upon parchment, the echo of a voice which rolled like a kettle-drum...

Suddenly the King laid down his pen and rose to his feet, a tall, lean, sombre-faced man in black and gold. He spoke a few words to Father Diego Deza and then went up to the Queen in the window.

The monk went on arranging papers in orderly bundles, and tying some of them with cords of green silk, which he drew from a silver box.

John saw the Queen's face. It lit up and became almost

beautiful for a second as Philip approached. Then as husband and wife conversed in low voices, the equerry saw yet another change come over Mary's twitching and expressive countenance. It hardened and froze, the thin lips tightened to a line of dull pink, the eyes grew bitter bright, the head nodded emphatically several times, as if in agreement at something the King was saying.

Then John felt some one touch his arm, and found that the Dominican had come to him noiselessly, and was smiling into his face with a flash of white teeth and steady, watchful eyes.

He started violently and turned his head from the Royal couple in some confusion. He felt as though he had been detected in some breach of manners, of espionage almost.

"Buenos dias, señor, como anda usted?" Don Diego asked in a low voice.

"Thank you, I am very well," Johnnie answered in Spanish.

"Como está su padre?"

"My father is very well also. He has just left me to ride home to Kent," John replied, wondering how in the world this foreign priest knew of the old knight's visit.

It was true, then, what Sir James Clinton had said! He was being carefully watched. Even in the Royal Closet his movements were known.

"A loyal gentleman and a good son of the Church," said the priest, "we have excellent reports of him, and of you also, señor," he concluded, with another smile.

John bowed.

"*Los negocios del politica*— affairs of state," the chaplain whispered with a half-glance at the couple in the window. "There are great times coming for England, señor. And if you prove yourself a loyal servant and good Catholic, you are destined to go far. His Most Catholic Majesty has need of an English gentleman such as you in his suite, of good birth, of the true religion, with Spanish blood in his veins, and speaking Spanish."

Again the young man bowed. He knew very well that these words were inspired. This suave ecclesiastic was the power behind the throne. He held the King's conscience, was his confessor, more powerful than any great lord or Minister — the secret, unofficial director of world-wide policies.

His heart beat high within him. The prospects opening before him were enough to dazzle the oldest and most experienced courtier; he was upon the threshold of such promotion and intimacies as he, the son of a plain country gentleman, had never dared to hope for.

It had grown very hot; he remarked upon it to the priest, noticing, as he did so, that the room was darker than before.

The air of the closet was heavy and oppressive, and glancing at the windows, he saw that it was no fancy of strained and excited nerves, but that the sky over the river was darkening, and the buildings upon London Bridge stood out with singular sharpness.

"A storm of thunder," said Don Diego indifferently, and then, with a gleam in his eyes, "and such a storm shall presently break over England that the air shall be cleared of heresy by

the lightnings of Holy Church – ah! here cometh His Grace of London!"

The Captain of the Guard had suddenly beaten upon the door. It was flung open, and Sir James Clinton, who had come down the passage from the Ante-room, preceded the Bishop, and announced him in a loud, sonorous voice.

Johnnie instinctively drew himself up to attention, the chaplain hastened forward, King Philip, in the window, stood upright, and the Queen remained seated. From the wall Johnnie saw all that happened quite distinctly. The scene was one which he never forgot.

There was the sudden stir and movement of his lordship's entrance, the alteration and grouping of the people in the closet, the challenge of the captain at the door, the heralding voice of Sir James – and then, into the room, which was momentarily growing darker as the thunder clouds advanced on London, Bishop Bonner came.

The man *pressed* into the room, swift, sudden, assertive. In his scarlet chimere and white rochet, with his bullet head and bristling beard, it was as though a shell had fallen into the room.

A streak of livid light fell upon his face – set, determined, and alive with purpose – and the man's eyes, greenish brown and very bright, caught a baleful fire from the waning gleam.

Then, with almost indecent haste, he brushed past John Commendone and the eager Spanish monk, and knelt before the Queen.

He kissed her hand, and the hand of the King Consort also, with some murmured words which Johnnie could not catch. Then he rose, and the Queen, as she had done upon her arrival from Winchester after her marriage, knelt for his blessing.

Commendone and the chaplain knelt also; the King of Spain bowed his head, as the rapid, breathless pattering Latin filled the place, and one outstretched hand – two white fingers and one white thumb – quivered for a moment and sank in the leaden light.

There was a new grouping of figures, some quick talk, and then the Queen's great voice filled the room.

"Mr. Commendone! See that there are lights!"

Johnnie stumbled out of the closet, now dark as at late evening, strode down the passage, burst into the Ante-room, and called out loudly, "Bring candles, bring candles!"

Even as he said it there was a terrible crash of thunder high in the air above the Palace, and a simultaneous flash of lightning, which lit up the sombre Ante-room with a blinding and ghostly radiance for the fraction of a second.

White faces immobile as pictures, tense forms of all waiting there, and then the voice of Sir James and the hurrying of feet as the servants rushed away...

It was soon done. While the thunder pealed and stammered overhead, the amethyst lightning sheets flickered and cracked, the white whips of the fork-lightning cut into the black and purple gloom, a little procession was made, and gentlemen ushers

followed Johnnie back to the Royal Closet, carrying candles in their massive silver sconces, dozens of twinkling orange points to illumine what was to be done.

The door was closed. The King, Queen, and the Bishop sat down at the central table upon which all the lights were set.

Don Diego Deza stood behind Philip's chair.

The Queen turned to John.

"Stand at the door, Mr. Commendone," she said, "and with your sword drawn. No one is to come in. We are engaged upon affairs of state."

Her voice was a second to the continuous mutter of the thunder, low, fierce, and charged with menace. Save for the candles, the room was now quite dark.

A furious wind had risen and blew great gouts of hot rain upon the window-panes with a rattle as of distant artillery.

Johnnie drew his sword, held it point downwards, and stood erect, guarding the door. He could feel the tapestry which covered it moving behind him, bellying out and pressing gently upon his back.

He could see the faces of the people at the table very distinctly.

The King of Spain and his chaplain were in profile to him. The Queen and the Bishop of London he saw full-face. He had not met the Bishop before, though he had heard much about him, and it was on the prelate's countenance that his glance of curiosity first fell.

Young as he was, Johnnie had already begun to cultivate that

cool scrutiny and estimation of character which was to stand him in such stead during the years that were to come. He watched the face of Edmund Bonner, or Boner, as the Bishop was more generally called at that time, with intense interest. Boner was to the Queen what the Dominican Deza was to her husband. The two priests ruled two monarchs.

In the yellow candle-light, an oasis of radiance in the murk and gloom of the storm, the faces of the people round the table hid nothing. The Bishop was bullet-headed, had protruding eyes, a bright colour, and his moustache and beard only partially hid lips that were red and full. The lips were red and full, there was a coarseness, and even sensuality, about them, which was, nevertheless, oddly at war with their determination and inflexibility. The young man, pure and fastidious himself, immediately realised that Boner was not vicious in the ordinary meaning of the word. One hears a good deal about "thin, cruel lips" – the Queen had them, indeed – but there are full and blood-charged lips which are cruel too. And these were the lips of the Bishop of London.

There was a huge force about the man. He was plebeian, common, but strong.

Don Diego, Commendone himself, the Queen and her husband, were all aristocrats in their different degree, bred from a line – pedigree people.

That was the bond between them.

The Bishop was outside all this, impatient of it, indeed; but

even while the groom of the body twirled his moustache with an almost mechanical gesture of disgust and misliking, he felt the power of the man.

And no historian has ever ventured to deny that. The natural son of the hedge-priest, George Savage – himself a bastard – walked life with a shield of brutal power as his armour. The blood-stained man from whom – a few years after – Queen Elizabeth turned away with a shudder of irrepressible horror, was the man who had dared to browbeat and bully Pope Clement VII himself. He took a personal and undignified delight in the details of physical and mental torture of his victims. In 1546 he had watched with his own eyes the convulsions of Dame Anne Askew upon the rack. He was sincere, inflexible, and remarkable for obstinacy in everything except principle. As Ambassador to Paris in Henry's reign he had smuggled over printed sheets of Coverdale's and Grafton's translation of the Bible in his baggage – the personal effects of an ambassador being then, as now, immune from prying eyes. During the Protectorate he had lain in prison, and now the strenuous opposer of papal claims in olden days was a bishop in full communion with Rome.

... He was speaking now, in a loud and vulgar voice, which even the presence of their Majesties failed to soften or subdue.

– "And this, so please Your Grace, is but a sign and indication of the spirit abroad. There is no surcease from it. We shall do well to gird us up and scourge this heresy from England. This letter was delivered by an unknown woman to my chaplain, Father

Holmes. 'Tis a sign of the times."

He unfolded a paper and began to read.

"I see that you are set all in a rage like a ravening wolf against the poor lambs of Christ appointed to the slaughter for the testimony of the truth. Indeed, you are called the common cut-throat and general slaughter-slave to all the bishops of England; and therefore 'tis wisdom for me and all other simple sheep of the Lord to keep us out of your butcher's stall as long as we can. The very papists themselves begin now to abhor your blood-thirstiness, and speak shame of your tyranny. Like tyranny, believe me, my lord, any child that can any whit speak, can call you by your name and say, 'Bloody Boner is Bishop of London'; and every man hath it as perfectly upon his fingers'-ends as his Paternoster, how many you, for your part, have burned with fire and famished in prison; they say the whole sum surmounteth to forty persons within this three-quarters of this year. Therefore, my lord, though your lordship believeth that there is neither heaven nor hell nor God nor devil, yet if your lordship love your own honesty, which was lost long ago, you were best to surcease from this cruel burning of Christian men, and also from murdering of some in prison, for that, indeed, offendeth men's minds most. Therefore, say not but a woman gave you warning, if you list to take it. And as for the obtaining of your popish purpose in suppressing the Truth, I put you out of doubt, you shall not obtain it as long as you go to work this way as ye do; for verily I believe that you have lost the hearts of twenty thousand

that were rank papists within this twelve months."

The Bishop put the letter down upon the table and beat upon it with his clenched fist. His face was alight with inquiry and anger.

Every one took it in a different fashion.

Philip crossed himself and said nothing, formal, cold, and almost uninterested. Don Diego crossed himself also. His face was stern, but his eyes flitted hither and thither, sparkling in the light.

Then the Queen's great voice boomed out into the place, drowning the thunder and the beating rain upon the window-panes, pressing in gouts of sound on the hot air of the closet.

Her face was bagged and pouched like a quilt. All womanhood was wiped out of it – lips white, eyes like ice...

"I'll stamp it out of this realm! I'll burn it out. Jesus! but we will burn it out!"

The Bishop's face was trembling with excitement. He thrust a paper in front of the Queen.

"Madam," he said, "this is the warrant for Doctor Rowland Taylor."

Mary caught up a pen and wrote her name at the foot of the document in the neat separated letters of one accustomed to write in Greek, below the signature of the Chancellor Gardiner and the Lords Montague and Wharton, judges of the Legantine Court for the trial of heretics.

"I will make short with him," the Queen said, "and of all blasphemers and heretics. There is the paper, my lord, with my

hand to it. A black knave this, they tell me, and withal very stubborn and lusty in blasphemy."

"A very black knave, Madam. I performed the ceremony of degradation upon him yestereen, and, by my troth, never did the walls of Newgate chapel shelter such a rogue before. He would not put on the vestments which I was to strip from him, and was then, at my order, robed by another. And when he was thoroughly furnished therewith, he set his hands to his sides and cried, 'How say you, my lord, am I not a goodly fool? How say you, my masters, if I were in Chepe, should I not have boys enough to laugh at these apish toys?'"

The Queen crossed herself. Her face blazed with fury. "Dog!" she cried. "Perchance he will sing another tune to-morrow morn. But what more?"

"I took my crosier-staff to smite him on the breast," the Bishop continued. "And upon that Mr. Holmes, that is my chaplain, said, 'Strike him not, my lord, for he will sure strike again.' 'Yes, and by St. Peter will I,' quoth Doctor Taylor. 'The cause is Christ's, and I were no good Christian if I would not fight in my Master's quarrel.' So I laid my curse on him, and struck him not."

The King's large, sombre face twisted into a cold sneer.

"*Perro labrador nunca buen mordedor*— a barking dog is never a good fighter," he said. "I shall watch this clerk-convict to-morrow. Methinks he will not be so lusty at his burning."

The Bishop looked up quickly with surprise in his face.

"My lord," the Queen said to him, "His Majesty, as is both just and right, desireth to see this blasphemer's end, and will report to me on the matter. Mr. Commendone, come here."

Johnnie advanced to the table.

"You will go to Sir John Shelton," the Queen went on, "and learn from him all that hath been arranged for the burning of this heretic. The King will ride with the party and you in close attendance upon His Majesty. Only you and Sir John will know who the King is, and your life depends upon his safety. I am weary of this business. My heart grieves for Holy Church while these wolves are not let from their wickedness. Go now, Mr. Commendone, upon your errand, and report to Father Deza this afternoon."

She held out her hand. John knelt on one knee and kissed it.

As he left the closet the rain was still lashing the window-panes, and the candles burnt yellow in the gloom.

By a sudden flash of lightning he saw the four faces looking down at the death warrant. There was a slight smile on all of them, and the expressions were very intent.

The great white crucifix upon the panelling gleamed like a ghost.

CHAPTER II

THE HOUSE OF SHAME; THE LADDER OF GLORY

It was ten o'clock in the evening. The thunderstorm of the morning had long since passed away. The night was cool and still. There was no moon, but the sky above London was powdered with stars.

The Palace of the Tower was ablaze with lights. The King and Queen had supped in state at eight, and now a masque was in progress, held in the glorious hall which Henry III painted with the story of Antiochus.

The sweet music shivered out into the night as John Commendone came into the garden among the sleeping flowers.

"And the harp and the viol, the tabret and pipe, and wine are in their feasts." Commendone had never read the Bible, but the words of the Prophet would have well expressed his mood had he but known them.

For he was melancholy and ill at ease. The exaltation of the morning had quite gone. Though he was still pleasantly conscious that he was in a fair way to great good fortune, some of the savour was lost. He could not forget the lurid scene in the Closet – the four faces haunted him still. And he knew also that a strange and probably terrible experience waited him during the next few

hours.

"God on the Cross," he said to himself, snapping his fingers in perplexity and misaise – it was the fashion at Court to use the great Tudor oaths – "I am come to touch with life – real life at last. And I am not sure that I like it. But 'tis too new as yet. I must be as other men are, I suppose!"

As he walked alone in the night, and the cool air played upon his face, he began to realise how placid, how much upon the surface, his life had always been until now. He had come to Court perfectly equipped by nature, birth, and training for the work of pageantry, a picturesque part in the retinue of kings. He had fallen into his place quite naturally. It all came easy to him. He had no trace of the "young gentleman from the country" about him – he might have started life as a Court page.

But the real emotions of life, the under-currents, the hates, loves, and strivings, had all been a closed book. He recognised their existence, but never thought they would or could affect him. He had imagined that he would always be aloof, an interested spectator, untouched, untroubled.

And he knew to-night that all this had been but a phantom of his brain. He was to be as other men. Life had got hold on him at last, stern and relentless.

"To-night," he thought, "I really begin to live. I am quickened to action. Some day, anon, I too must make a great decision, one way or the other. The scene is set, they are pulling the traverse from before it, the play begins.

"I am a fair white page," he said to himself, "on which nothing is writ, I have ever been that. To-night comes Master Scrivener. 'I have a mind to write upon thee,' he saith, and needs be that I submit."

He sighed.

The music came to him, sweet and gracious. The long orange-litten windows of the Palace spoke of the splendours within.

But he thought of a man – whose name he had never heard until that morning – lying in some dark room, waiting for those who were to come for him, the man whom he would watch burning before the sun had set again.

It had been an evening of incomparable splendour.

The King and Queen had been served with all the panoply of state. The Duke of Norfolk, the Earls of Arundel and Pembroke, Lord Paget and Lord Rochester, had been in close attendance.

The Duke had held the ewer of water, Paget and Rochester the bason and napkin. After the ablutions the Bishop of London said grace.

The Queen blazed with jewels. The life of seclusion she had led before her accession had by no means dulled the love of splendour inherent in her family. Even the French ambassador, well used to pomp and display, leaves his own astonishment on record.

She wore raised cloth of gold, and round her thin throat was a partlet or collar of emeralds. Her stomacher was of diamonds, an almost barbaric display of twinkling fire, and over her gold

caul was a cap of black velvet sewn with pearls.

During the whole of supper it was remarked that Her Grace was merry. The gay lords and ladies who surrounded her and the King – for all alike, young maids and grey-haired dames of sixty must blaze and sparkle too – nodded and whispered to each other, wondering at this high good-humour.

When the Server advanced with his white wand, heading the procession of yeomen-servers with the gilt dishes of the second course – he was a fat pottle-bellied man – the Queen turned to the Duke of Norfolk.

"*Dame!*" she said in French, "here is a prancing pie! *Ma mye!* A capon of high grease! Methinks this gentleman hath a very single eye for the larder!"

"Yes, m'am," the Duke answered, "and so would make a better feast for Polypheme than e'er the lean Odysseus."

They went on with their play of words upon the names of the dishes in the menu...

"But say rather a porpoise in armour."

"Halibut engrailed, Madam, hath a face of peculiar whiteness like the under belly of that fish!"

"A jowl of sturgeon!"

"A Florentine of puff paste, m'am."

"*Habet!*" the Queen replied, "I can't better that. Could you, Lady Paget? You are a great jester."

Lady Paget, a stately white-haired dame, bowed to the Duke and then to the Queen.

"His Grace is quick in the riposte," she said, "and if Your Majesty gives him the palm — *qui meruit ferat!* But capon of high grease for my liking."

"But you've said nothing, Lady Paget."

"My wit is like my body, m'am, grown old and rheumy. The salad days of it are over. I abdicate in favour of youth."

Again this adroit lady bowed.

The Queen flushed up, obviously pleased with the compliment. She looked at the King to see if he had heard or understood it.

The King had been talking to the Bishop of London, partly in such Latin as he could muster, which was not much, but principally with the aid of Don Diego Deza, who stood behind His Majesty's chair, and acted as interpreter – the Dominican speaking English fluently.

During the whole of supper Philip had appeared less morose than usual. There was a certain fire of expectancy and complacency in his eye. He had smiled several times; his manner to the Queen had been more genial than it was wont to be – a fact which, in the opinion of everybody, duly accounted for Her Grace's high spirits and merriment.

He looked up now as Lady Paget spoke.

"*Ensalada!*" he said, having caught one word of Lady Paget's speech – salad. "Yes, give me some salad. It is the one thing" – he hastened to correct himself – "it is one of the things they make better in England than in my country."

The Queen was in high glee.

"His Highness grows more fond of our English food," she said; and in a moment or two the Comptroller of the Household came up to the King's chair, followed by a pensioner bearing a great silver bowl of one of those wonderful salads of the period, which no modern skill of the kitchen seems able to produce to-day – burridge, chicory, bugloss, marigold leaves, rocket, and alexanders, all mixed with eggs, cinnamon, oil, and ginger.

Johnnie, who was sitting at the Esquires' table, with the Gentlemen of the Body and Privy Closet, had watched the gay and stately scene till supper was nearly over.

The lights, the music, the high air, the festivity, had had no power to lighten the oppression which he felt, and when at length the King and Queen rose and withdrew to the great gallery where the Masque was presently to begin, he had slipped out alone into the garden.

"His golden locks time hath to silver turned."

The throbbing music of the old song, the harps' thridding, the lutes shivering out their arpeggio accompaniment, the viols singing together – came to him with rare and plaintive sweetness, but they brought but little balm or assuagement to his dark, excited mood.

Ten o'clock beat out from the roof of the Palace. Johnnie left the garden. He was to receive his instruction as to his night's doing from Mr. Medley, the Esquire of Sir John Shelton, in the Common Room of the Gentlemen of the Body.

He strode across the square in front of the façade, and turned into the long panelled room where he had breakfasted that morning.

It was quite empty now – every one was at the Masque – but two silver lamps illuminated it, and shone upon the dark walls of the glittering array of plate upon the beaufet.

He had not waited there a minute, however, leaning against the tall carved mantelpiece, a tall and gallant figure in his rich evening dress, when steps were heard coming through the hall, the door swung open, and Mr. Medley entered.

He was a thick-set, bearded man of middle height, more soldier than courtier, with the stamp of the barrack-room and camp upon him; a brisk, quick-spoken man, with compressed lips and an air of swift service.

"Give you good evening, Mr. Commendone," he said; "I am come with Sir John's orders."

Johnnie bowed. "At your service," he answered.

The soldier looked round the room carefully before speaking.

"There is no one here, Mr. Medley," Johnnie said.

The other nodded and came close up to the young courtier.

"The Masque hath been going this half-hour," he said, in a low voice, "but His Highness hath withdrawn. Her Grace is still with the dancers, and in high good-humour. Now, I must tell you, Mr. Commendone, that the Queen thinketh His Highness in his own wing of the Palace, and with Don Diego and Don de Castro, his two confessors. She is willing that this should be

so, and said 'Good night' to His Highness after supper, knowing that he will presently set out to the burning of Dr. Taylor. She knoweth that the party sets out for Hadley at two o'clock, and thinketh that His Highness is spending the time before then in prayer and a little sleep. I tell you this, Mr. Commendone, in order that you go not back to the Masque before that you set out from the Tower to a certain house where His Highness will be with Sir John Shelton. You will take your own servant mounted and armed, and a man-at-arms also will be at the door of your lodging here at ten minutes of midnight. The word at the Coal Harbour Gate is 'Christ.' With your two men you will at once ride over London Bridge and so to Duck Lane, scarce a furlong from the other side of the bridge. Doubtless you know it" – and here the man's eyes flickered with a half smile for a moment – "but if not, the man-at-arms, one of Sir John's men, will show you the way. You will knock at the big house with the red door, and be at once admitted. There will be a light over the door. His Highness will be there with Sir John, and that is all I have to tell you. Afterwards you will know what to do."

Johnnie bowed. "Give you good night," he said. "I understand very well."

As soon as the Esquire had gone, Johnnie turned out of the Common Room, ascended the stairs, went to his own chamber and threw himself upon the little bed.

He had imagined that something like this was likely to occur. The King's habits were perfectly well known to all those about

him, and indeed were whispered of in the Court at large, Queen Mary, alone, apparently knowing nothing of the truth as yet. The King's unusual bonhomie at supper could hardly be accounted for, at least so Johnnie thought, by the fact that he was to see his own and the Queen's bigotry translated into dreadful reality. To the keen young student of faces the King had seemed generally relieved, expectant, with the air of a boy about to be released from school. Now, the reason was plain enough. His Highness had gone with Sir John Shelton to some infamous house in a bad quarter of the city, and it was there the Equerry was to meet him and ride to the death scene.

Johnnie tossed impatiently upon his bed. He remembered how on that very morning he had expressed his hopes to Sir Henry that his duties would not lead him into dubious places. A lot of water had run under the bridges since he kissed his father farewell in the bright morning light. His whole prospects were altered, and advanced. For one thing, he had been present at an intimate and private conference and had received marked and special favour – he shuddered now as he remembered the four intent faces round the table in the Privy Closet, those sharp faces, with a cruel smirk upon them, those still faces with the orange light playing over them in the dark, tempest-haunted room.

"I' faith," he said to himself, "thou art fairly put to sea, Johnnie! but I will not feed myself with questioning. I am in the service of princes, and must needs do as I am told. Who am I to be squeamish? But hey-ho! I would I were in the park at

Commendone to-night."

About eleven o'clock his servant came to him and helped him to change his dress. He wore long riding-boots of Spanish leather, a light corselet of tough steel, inlaid with arabesques of gold, and a big quilted Spanish hat. Over all he fastened a short riding-cloak of supple leather dyed purple. He primed his pistols and gave them to a man to be put into his holsters, and about a quarter before midnight descended the stairs.

He found a man-at-arms with a short pike, already mounted, and his servant leading the other two horses; he walked toward the Coal Harbour Gate, gave the word to the Lieutenant of the Guard, and left the Tower.

A light moon was just beginning to rise and throw fantastic shadows over Tower Hill. It was bright enough to ride by, and Johnnie forbade his man to light the horn lantern which was hanging at the fellow's saddle-bow.

They went at a foot pace, the horses' feet echoing with an empty, melancholy sound from the old timbered houses back to the great bastion wall of the Tower.

The man-at-arms led the way. When they came to London Bridge, where a single lantern showed the broad oak bar studded with nails, which ran across the roadway, Johnnie noticed that upon the other side of it were two halberdiers of the Tower Guard in their uniforms of black and crimson, talking to the keeper of the gate.

As they came up the bar swung open.

"Mr. Commendone?" said the keeper, an elderly man in a leather jerkin.

Johnnie nodded.

"Pass through, sir," the man replied, saluting, as did also the two soldiers who were standing there.

The little cavalcade went slowly over the bridge between the tall houses on either side, which at certain points almost met with their overhanging eaves. The shutters were up all over the little jewellers' shops. Here and there a lamp burned from an upstairs window, and the swish and swirl of the river below could be heard quite distinctly.

At the middle of the bridge, just by the well-known armourer's shop of Guido Ponzio, the Italian sword-smith, whose weapons were eagerly purchased by members of the Court and the officers both of the Tower and Whitehall, another halberdier was standing, who again saluted Commendone as he rode by.

It was quite obvious to Johnnie that every precaution had been taken so that the King's excursion into *les coulisses* might be undisturbed.

The pike was swung open for them on the south side of the bridge directly they drew near, and putting their horses to the trot, they cantered over a hundred yards of trodden grass round which houses were standing in the form of a little square, and in a few minutes more turned into Duck Lane.

At this hour of the night the narrow street of heavily-timbered houses was quite dark and silent. It seemed there was not a

soul abroad, and this surprised Johnnie, who had been led to understand that at midnight "The Lane" was frequently the scene of roistering activity. Now, however, the houses were all blind and dark, and the three horsemen might have been moving down a street in the city of the dead.

Only the big honey-coloured moon threw a primrose light upon the topmost gables of the houses on the left side of "The Lane" – all the rest being black velvet, sombreness and shadow.

John's mouth curved a little in disdain under his small dark moustache, as he noted all this and realised exactly what it meant.

When a king set out for furtive pleasures, lesser men of vice must get them to their kennels! Lights were out, all manifestation of evil was thickly curtained. The shameless folk of that wicked quarter of the town must have shame imposed upon them for the night.

The King was taking his pleasure.

John Commendone, since his arrival in London, and at the Court, had quietly refused to be a member of any of those hot-blooded parties of young men who sallied out from the Tower or from Whitehall when the reputable world was sleeping. It was not to his taste. He was perfectly capable of tolerating vice in others – looking on it, indeed, as a natural manifestation of human nature and event. But for himself he had preferred aloofness.

Nevertheless, from the descriptions of his friends, he knew that Duck Lane to-night was wearing an aspect which it very seldom wore, and as he rode slowly down that blind and sinister

thoroughfare with his attendants, he realised with a little cold shudder what it was to be a king.

He himself was the servant of a king, one of those whom good fortune and opportunity had promoted to be a minister to those almost super-human beings who could do no wrong, and ruled and swayed all other men by means of their Divine Right.

This was a position he perfectly accepted, had accepted from the first. Already he was rising high in the course of life he had started to pursue. He had no thought of questioning the deeds of princes. He knew that it was his duty, his *métier*, in life to be a pawn in the great game. What affected him now, however, as they came up to a big house of free-stone and timber, where a lantern of horn hung over a door painted a dull scarlet, was a sense of the enormous and irrevocable power of those who were set on high to rule.

No! They were not human, they were not as other men and women are.

He had been in the Queen's Closet that morning, and had seen the death warrant signed. The great convulsion of nature, the furious thunders of God, had only been, as it were, a mere accompaniment to the business of the four people in the Queen's lodge.

A scratch of a pen – a man to die.

And then, during the evening, he had seen, once more, the King and Queen, bright, glittering and radiant, surrounded by the highest and noblest of England, serene, unapproachable, the

centre of the stupendous pageant of the hour.

And now, again, he was come to the stews, to the vile quarter of London, and even here the secret presence of a king closed all doors, and kept the pandars and victims of evil silent in their dens like crouching hares.

As they came up to the big, dark house, a little breeze from the river swirled down the Lane, and fell fresh upon Johnnie's cheek. As it did so, he knew that he was hot and fevered, that the riot of thought within him had risen the temperature of his blood. It was cool and grateful – this little clean breeze of the water, and he longed once more, though only for a single second, that he was home in the stately park of Commendone, and had never heard the muffled throb of the great machine of State, of polity, and the going hither and thither of kings and queens.

But it only lasted for a moment.

He was disciplined, he was under orders. He pulled himself together, banished all wild and speculative thought – sat up in the saddle, gripped the sides of his cob with his knees, and set his left arm akimbo.

"This is the house, sir," said the trooper, saluting.

"Very well," Johnnie answered, as his servant dismounted and took his horse by the bridle.

Johnnie leapt to the ground, pulled his sword-belt into position, settled his hat upon his head, and with his gloved fist beat upon the big red door before him.

In ten seconds he heard a step on the other side of the door. It

swung open, and a tall, thin person, wearing a scarlet robe and a mask of black velvet over the upper part of the face, bowed low before him, and with a gesture invited him to enter.

Johnnie turned round.

"You will stay here," he said to the men. "Be quite silent, and don't stray away a yard from the door."

Then he followed the tall, thin figure, which closed the door, and flitted down a short passage in front of him with noiseless footsteps.

He knew at once that he was in Queer Street.

The nondescript figure in its fantastic robe and mask struck a chill of disgust to his blood.

It was a fantastic age, and all aberrations – all deviations – from the normal were constantly accentuated by means of costumes and theatric effect.

The superficial observer of the manners of our day is often apt to exclaim upon the decadence of our time. One has heard perfectly sincere and healthy Englishmen inveigh with anger upon the literature of the moment, the softness and luxury of life and art, the invasion of sturdy English ideals by the corrupt influences of France.

"Give me the days of Good Queen Bess, the hearty, healthy, strong Tudor life," is the sort of exclamation by no means rare in our time.

... "Bluff King Hal! Drake, Raleigh, all that rough, brave, and splendid time! Think of Shakespeare, my boy!"

Whether or no our own days are deficient in hardihood and endurance is not a question to be discussed here – though the private records of England's last war might very well provide a complete answer to the query. It is certain, however, that in an age when personal prowess with arms was still a title to fortune, when every gentleman of position and birth knew and practised the use of weapons, the under-currents of life, the hidden sides of social affairs, were at least as "curious" and "decadent" as anything Montmartre or the Quartier Latin have to show.

It must be remembered that in the late Tudor Age almost every one of good family, each gentleman about the Court, was not only a trained soldier, but also a highly cultured person as well. The Renaissance in Italy was in full swing and activity. Its culture had crossed the Alps, its art was borne upon the wings of its advance to our northern shores.

Grossness was refined...

Johnnie twirled his moustache as he followed the nondescript sexless figure which flitted down the dimly-lit panelled passage before him like some creature from a masque.

At the end of the passage there was a door.

Arrived at it, a long, thin arm, in a sleeve of close-fitting black silk, shot out from the red robe. A thin ivory-coloured hand, with fingers of almost preternatural length, rose to a painted scarlet slit which was the creature's mouth.

The masked head dropped a little to one side, one lean finger, shining like a fish-bone, tapped the mouth significantly, the door

opened, some heavy curtains of Flanders tapestry were pushed aside, and the Equerry walked into a place as strange and sickly as he had ever met in some fantastic or disordered dream.

Johnnie heard the door close softly behind him, the "swish, swish" of the falling curtains. And then he stood up, his eyes blinking a little in the bright light which streamed upon them – his hand upon his sword-hilt – and looked around to find himself. He was in a smallish room, hung around entirely with an arras of scarlet cloth, powdered at regular intervals with a pattern of golden bats.

The floor was covered with a heavy carpet of Flanders pile – a very rare and luxurious thing in those days – and the whole room was lit by its silver lamps, which hung from the ceiling upon chains. On one side, opposite the door, was a great pile of cushions, going half-way up the wall towards the ceiling – cushions as of strange barbaric colours, violent colours that smote upon the eye and seemed almost to do the brain a violence.

In the middle of the room, right in the centre, was a low oak stool, upon which was a silver tray. In the middle of the tray was a miniature chafing-dish, beneath which some volatile amethyst-coloured flame was burning, and from the dish itself a pastille, smouldering and heated, sent up a thin, grey whip of odorous smoke.

The whole air of this curious tented room was heavy and languorous with perfume. Sickly, and yet with a sensuous allurements, the place seemed to reel round the young man, to

disgust one side of him, the real side; and yet, in some low, evil fashion, to beckon to base things in his blood – base thoughts, physical influences which he had never known before, and which now seemed to suddenly wake out of a long sleep, and to whisper in his ears.

All this, this surveyal of the place in which he found himself, took but a moment, and he had hardly stood there for three seconds – tall, upright, and debonair, amid the wicked luxury of the room – when he heard a sound to his left, and, turning, saw that he was not alone.

Behind a little table of Italian filigree work, upon which were a pair of tiny velvet slippers, embroidered with burnt silver, a sprunking-glass – or pocket mirror – and a tall-stemmed bottle of wine, sat a vast, pink, fleshy, elderly woman.

Her face, which was as big as a ham, was painted white and scarlet. Her eyebrows were pencilled with deep black, the heavy eyes shared the vacuity of glass, with an evil and steadfast glitter of welcome.

There were great pouches underneath the eyes; the nose was hawk-like, the chins pendulous, the lips once, perhaps, well curved and beautiful enough, now full, bloated, and red with horrid invitation.

The woman was dressed with extreme richness.

Fat and powdered fingers were covered with rings. Her corsage was jewelled – she was like some dreadful mummy of what youth had been, a sullen caricature of a long-past youth,

when she also might have walked in the fields under God's sky, heard bird-music, and seen the dew upon the bracken at dawn.

Johnnie stirred and blinked at this apparition for a moment; then his natural courtesy and training came to him, and he bowed.

As he did so, the fat old woman threw out her jewelled arms, leant back in her chair, stuttering and choking with amusement.

"*Tiens!*" she said in French, "*Monsieur qui arrive!* Why have you never been to see me before, my dear?"

Johnnie said nothing at all. His head was bent a little forward. He was regarding this old French procuress with grave attention.

He knew now at once who she was. He had heard her name handed about the Court very often – Madame La Motte.

"You are a little out of my way, Madame," Johnnie answered. "I come not over Thames. You see, I am but newly arrived at the Court."

He said it perfectly politely, but with a little tiny, half-hidden sneer, which the woman was quick to notice.

"Ah! Monsieur," she said, "you are here on duty. *Merci*, that I know very well. Those for whom you have come will be down from above stairs very soon, and then you can go about your business. But you will take a glass of wine with me?"

"I shall be very glad, Madame," Johnnie answered, as he watched the fat, trembling hand, with all its winking jewels, pouring Vin de Burgogne into a glass. He raised it and bowed.

The old painted woman raised her glass also, and lifted it to her lips, tossing the wine down with a sudden smack of

satisfaction.

Then, in that strange perfumed room, the two oddly assorted people looked at each other straightly for a moment.

Neither spoke.

At length Madame La Motte, of the great big house with the red door, heaved herself out of her arm-chair, and waddled round the table. She was short and fat; she put one hand upon the shoulder of the tall, clean young man in his riding suit and light armour.

"*Mon ami*," she said thickly, "don't come here again."

Johnnie looked down at the hideous old creature, but with a singular feeling of pity and compassion.

"Madame," he said, "I don't propose to come again."

"Thou art limn and debonair, and a very pretty boy, but come not here, because in thy face I see other things for thee. Lads of the Court come to see me and my girls, proper lads too, but in their faces there is not what I discern in thy face. For them it matters nothing; for thee 'twould be a stain for all thy life. Thou knowest well whom I am, Monsieur, and canst guess well where I shall go – e'en though His Most Catholic Majesty be above stairs, and will get absolution for all he is pleased to do here. But you – thou wilt be a clean boy. Is it not so?"

The fat hand trembled upon the young man's arm, the hoarse, sodden voice was full of pleading.

"*Ma mère*," Johnnie answered her in her own language, "have no fear for me. I thank you – but I did not understand..."

"Boy," she cried, "thou canst not understand. Many steps down hellwards have I gone, and in the pit there is knowledge. I knew good as thou knowest it. Evil now I know as, please God, thou wilt never know it. But, look you, from my very knowledge of evil, I am given a tongue with which to speak to thee. Keep virgin. Thou art virgin now; my hand upon thy sword-arm tells me that. Keep virgin until the day cometh and bringeth thy lady and thy destined love to thee."

There were tears in the young man's eyes as he looked down into the great pendulous painted face, from which now the evil seemed to be wiped away as a cloth wipes away a chalk mark upon a slate.

As the last ray of a setting sun sometimes touches to a fugitive glory – a last fugitive glory – some ugly, sordid building of a town, so here he saw something maternal and sweet upon the face of this old brothel-keeper, this woman who had amassed a huge fortune in ministering to the pride of life, the pomp, vanity, and lusts of Principalities and Powers.

He turned half round, and took the woman's left hand in his.

"My mother," he said, with an infinitely winning and yet very melancholy gaze, "my mother, I think, indeed, that love will never come to me. I am not made so. May the Mother of God shield me from that which is not love, but nathless seemeth to have love's visage when one is hot in wine or stirred to excitement. But thou, thou wert not ever..."

She broke in upon him quickly.

Her great red lips pouted out like a ripe plum. The protruding fishy eyes positively lit up with disdain of herself and of her life.

"*Mon cher,*" she said, "*Holà!* I was a young girl once in Lorraine. I had a brother – I will tell you little of that old time – but I have blood."

"Yes," she continued, throwing back her head, till the great rolls of flesh beneath her chin stretched into tightness, "yes, I have blood. There was a day when I was a child, when the poet Jean D'Aquis wrote of us —

'Quand nous habitions tous ensemble
Sur nos collines d'autrefois,
Où l'eau court, où le buisson tremble
Dans la maison qui touche aux bois.'

... It was." Suddenly she left Johnnie standing in the middle of the room, and with extraordinary agility for her weight and years, glided round the little table, and sank once more into her seat.

The door at the other end of the room opened, and a tall girl, with a white face and thin, wicked mouth, and a glorious coronal of red hair came into the room.

"'Tis finished," she said, to the mistress of the house. "Sir John Shelton is far in drink. He – " she stopped suddenly, as she saw Johnnie, gave him a keen, questioning glance, and then looked once more towards the fat woman in the chair.

Madame nodded. "This is His Highness's gentleman," she said, "awaiting him. So it's finished?"

The girl nodded, beginning to survey Johnnie with a cruel, wicked scrutiny, which made him flush with mingled embarrassment and anger.

"His Highness is coming down, Mr. Esquire," she said, pushing out a little red tip of tongue from between her lips. "His Highness..."

The old woman in the chair suddenly leapt up. She ran at the tall, red-haired girl, caught her by the throat, and beat her about the face with her fat, jewelled hands, cursing her in strange French oaths, clutching at her hair, shaking her, swinging her about with a dreadful vulgar ferocity which turned John's blood cold.

As he stood there he caught a glimpse, never to be forgotten, of all that underlay this veneer of midnight luxury. He saw vile passions at work, he realised – for the first time truly and completely – in what a hideous place he was.

The tall girl, sobbing and bleeding in the face, disappeared behind the arras. The old woman turned to Johnnie. Her face was almost purple with exertion, her eyes blazed, her hawk-like nose seemed to twitch from side to side, she panted out an apology:

"She dared, Monsieur, she dared, one of my girls, one of my slaves! Hist!"

A loud voice was heard from above, feet trampled upon stairs, through the open door which led to the upper parts of the house of ill-fame came Sir John Shelton, a big, gross, athletic man, obviously far gone in wine.

He saw Johnnie. "Ah, Mr. Commendone," he said thickly. "Here we are, and here are you! God's teeth! I like well to see you. I myself am well gone in wine, though I will sit my horse, as thou wilt see."

He lurched up to Johnnie and whispered in the young man's ear, with hot, wine-tainted breath.

"He's coming down," he whispered. "It's your part to take charge of His Highness. He's – "

Sir John stood upright, swaying a little from the shoulders, as down the stairway, framed in the lintel of the door, came King Philip of Spain.

The King was dressed very much as Johnnie himself was dressed; his long, melancholy face was a little flushed – though not with wine. His eyes were bright, his thin lips moved and worked.

Directly he saw Commendone his face lit up with recognition. It seemed suddenly to change.

"Ah, you are here, Mr. Commendone," he said in Spanish. "I am glad to see you. We have had our amusements, and now we go upon serious business."

The alteration in the King's demeanour was instant. Temperate, as all Spaniards were and are, he was capable at a moment's notice of dismissing what had passed, and changing from *bon viveur* into a grave potentate in a flash.

He came up to Johnnie. "Now, Mr. Commendone," he said, in a quiet, decisive voice, "we will get to horse and go upon our

business. The *señor don* here is gone in wine, but he will recover as we ride to Hadley. You are in charge. Let's begone from this house."

The King led the way out of the red room.

The old procuress bowed to the ground as he went by, but he took no notice of her.

Johnnie followed the King, Sir John Shelton came staggering after, and in a moment or two they were out in the street, where was now gathered a small company of horse, with serving-men holding up torches to illumine the blackness of the night.

They mounted and rode away slowly out of Duck Lane and across London Bridge, the noise of their passing echoing between the tall, barred houses.

Several soldiers rode first, and after them came Sir John Shelton. Commendone rode at the King's left hand, and he noticed that His Highness's broad hat was pulled low over his face and a riding cloak muffled the lower part of it. Behind them came the other men-at-arms. As soon as they were clear of the bridge the walk changed into a trot, and the cavalcade pushed toward Aldgate. Not a soul was in the streets until they came to the city gate itself, where there was the usual guard. They passed through and came up to the "Woolsack," a large inn which was just outside the wall. In the light of the torches Commendone could see that the place was obviously one of considerable importance, and had probably been a gentleman's house in the past.

Large square windows divided into many lights by mullions

and transoms took up the whole of the front. The roofs were ornamental, richly crocketed and finialed, while there was a blazonry of painted heraldry and coats of arms over and around the large central porch. Large stacks of tall, slender chimney-shafts, moulded and twisted, rose up into the dark, and were ornamented over their whole surface with diaper patterns and more armorial bearings. The big central door of the "Woolsack" stood open, and a ruddy light beamed out from the hall and from the windows upon the ground-floor. As they came up, and Sir John Shelton stumbled from his horse, holding the King's stirrup for him to dismount, Commendone saw that the space in front of the inn, a wide square with a little trodden green in the centre of it, held groups of dark figures standing here and there.

Halberds rose up against the walls of the houses, showing distinctly in the occasional light from a cresset held by a man-at-arms.

Sir John Shelton strode noisily into a big panelled hall, the King and Commendone following him, Johnnie realising that, of course, His Highness was incognito.

The host of the inn, Putton, hurried forward, and behind him was one of the Sheriffs of London, who held some papers in his hand and greeted Sir John Shelton with marked civility.

The knight pulled himself together, and shook the Sheriff by the hand.

"Is everything prepared," he said, "Mr. Sheriff?"

"We are all quite ready, Sir John," the Sheriff answered,

looking with inquiring eyes at Commendone and the tall, muffled figure of the King.

"Two gentlemen of the Court who have been deputed by Her Grace to see justice done," Sir John said. "And now we will to the prisoner."

Putton stepped forward. "This way, gentlemen," he said. "Dr. Taylor is with his guards in the large room. He hath taken a little succory pottage and a flagon of ale, and seemeth resigned and ready to set out."

With that the host opened a door upon the right-hand side of the hall and ushered the party into a room which was used as the ordinary of the inn, a lofty and spacious place lit with candles.

There was a high carved chimney-piece, over which were the arms of the Vintners' Company, sable and chevron *cetu*, three tuns argent, with the figure of Bacchus for a crest. A long table ran down the centre of the place, and at one end of it, seated in a large chair of oak, sat the late Archdeacon of Exeter. Three or four guards stood round in silence.

Dr. Rowland Taylor was a huge man, over six feet in height, and more than a little corpulent. His face, which was very pale, was strongly cast, his eyes, under shaggy white brows, bright and humorous; the big, genial mouth, half-hidden by the white moustache and beard, both kindly and strong. He wore a dark gown and a flat velvet cap upon his head, and he rose immediately as the company entered.

"We are come for you, Dr. Taylor," the Sheriff said, "and you

must immediately to horse."

The big man bowed, with quiet self-possession.

"'Tis very well, Master Sheriff," he said; "I have been waiting this half-hour agone."

"Bring him out," said Sir John Shelton, in a loud, harsh voice. "Keep silence, Master Taylor, or I will find a way to silence thee."

John Commendone shivered with disgust as the leader of the party spoke.

Even as he did so he felt a hand upon his arm, and the tall, muffled figure of the King stood close behind him.

"Tell the knight, señor," the King said rapidly in Spanish, "to use the gentleman with more civility. He is to die, as is well fitting a heretic should die, for God's glory and the safety of the realm. But he is of gentle birth. Tell Sir John Shelton."

Commendone stepped up to Sir John. "Sir," he said, in a voice which, try as he would, he could not keep from being very disdainful and cold – "Sir, His Highness bids me to tell you to use Dr. Taylor with civility, as becomes a man of his birth."

The half-drunken captain glared at the cool young courtier for a moment, but he said nothing, and, turning on his heel, clanked out of the room with a rattle of his sword and an aggressive, ruffling manner.

Dr. Taylor, with guards on each side, the Sheriff immediately preceding him, walked down the room and out into the hall.

Commendone and the King came last.

Johnnie was seized with a sudden revulsion of feeling towards

his master. This man, cruel and bigoted as he was, the man whom he had seen with fanaticism and the blood lust blazing in his eye, the man whom he had seen calmly leaving a vile house, was nevertheless a king and a gentleman. The young man could hardly understand or realise the extraordinary combination of qualities in the austere figure by his side of the man who ruled half the known world. Again, he felt that sense of awe, almost of fear, in the presence of one so far removed from ordinary men, so swift in his alterations from coarseness to kingliness, from relentless cruelty to cold, sombre decorum.

Dr. Taylor was mounted upon a stout cob, closely surrounded by guards, and with a harsh word of command from Sir John, the party set out.

The host of the "Woolsack" stood at his lighted door, where there was a little group of serving-men and halberdiers, sharply outlined against the red-litten façade of the quaint old building, and then, as they turned a corner, it all flashed away, and they went forward quietly and steadily through a street of tall gabled houses.

Directly the lights of the inn and the square in front of it were left behind, they saw at once that dawn was about to begin. The houses were grey now, each moment more grey and ghostly, and they were no longer sable and shapeless. The air, too, had a slight stir and chill within it, and each moment of their advance the ghostly light grew stronger, more wan and spectral than ever the dark had been.

Pursuant to his instructions, Commendone kept close to the King, who rode silently with a drooping head, as one lost in thought. In front of them were the backs of the guards in their steel corselets, and in the centre of the group was the massive figure of the man who was riding to his death, a huge, black outline, erect and dignified.

John rode with the rest as a man in a dream. His mind and imagination were in a state in which the moving figures around him, the cavalcade of which he himself was a part, seemed but phantoms playing fantastic parts upon the stage of some unreal theatre of dreams.

He heard once more the great man-like voice of Queen Mary, but it seemed very far away, a sinister thing, echoing from a time long past.

The music of the dance in the Palace tinkled and vibrated through his subconscious brain, and then once more he heard the voice of the evil old woman of the red house, the voice of one in hell, telling him to flee youthful lusts, telling him to wait stainless until love should come to him.

Love! He smiled unconsciously to himself. Love! – why should the thoughts of love come to a heart-whole man riding upon this sad errand of death; through ghostly streets, stark and grey?..

He looked up dreamily and saw before him, cutting into a sky which was now big and tremulous with dawn, the tower of St. Botolph's Church, a faint, misty purple. Far away in the east the

sky was faintly streaked with pink and orange, the curtain of the dark was shaken by the birth-pangs of the morning. The western sky over St. Paul's was already aglow with a red, reflected light.

The transition was extraordinarily sudden. Every instant the aspect of things changed; the whole visible world was being re-created, second by second, not gradually, but with a steady, pressing onrush, in which time seemed merged and forgotten, to be of no account at all, and a thing that was not.

Johnnie had seen the great copper-coloured moon heave itself out of the sea just like that – the world turning to splendour before his eyes.

But it was dawn now, and in the miraculously clear, inspiring light, the countless towers and pinnacles of the city rose with sharp outline into the quiet sky.

The breeze from the river rustled and whispered by them like the trailing skirts of unseen presences, and as the cool air in all its purity came over the silent town, the feverishness and sense of unreality in the young man's mind were dissolved and blown away.

How silent London was! – the broad street stretched out before them like a ribbon of silver-grey, but the tower of St. Botolph's was already solid stone, and no longer mystic purple.

And then, for some reason or other, John Commendone's heart began to beat furiously. He could not have said why or how. There seemed no reason to account for it, but all his pulses were stirred. A sense of expectancy, which was painful in its

intensity, and unlike anything he had ever known before in his life, pervaded all his consciousness.

He gripped his horse by the knees, his left hand holding the leather reins, hung with little tassels of vermilion silk, his right hand resting upon the handle of his sword.

They came up to the porch of the church, and suddenly the foremost men-at-arms halted, the slight backward movement of their horses sending those who followed backward also. There was a pawing of hooves, a rattle of accoutrements, a sharp order from somewhere in front, and then they were all sitting motionless.

The moment had arrived. John Commendone saw what he had come to see. From that instant his real life began. All that had gone before, as he saw in after years, had been but a leading up and preparation for this time.

Standing just outside the porch of the church was a small group of figures, clustering together, white faces, pitiful and forlorn.

Dr. Taylor's wife, suspecting that her husband should that night be carried away, had watched all night in St. Botolph's porch, having with her her two children, and a man-servant of their house.

The men-at-arms had opened out a little, remaining quite motionless on their horses.

Sir John Shelton, obviously mindful of Commendone's warning at the "Woolsack," remained silent also, his blotched

face grey and scowling in the dawn, though he said no word.

The King pulled his hat further over his eyes, and Johnnie at his right could see perfectly all that was happening.

He heard a voice, a girl's voice.

"Oh, my dear father! Mother! mother! here is my father led away."

Almost every one who has lived from any depth of being, for whom the world is no grossly material place, but a state which is constantly impinged upon and mingles with the Unseen, must be conscious that at one time or other of his life sound has been, perhaps, the most predominant influence in it.

Now and again, at rare and memorable intervals, the grossness of this tabernacle wherein the soul is encased is pierced by sound. More than all else, sound penetrates deep into the spiritual consciousness, punctuates life, as it were, at rare moments of emotion, gathering up and crystallising a thousand fancies and feelings which seem to have no adequate cause among outward things.

Johnnie had heard the sound of his mother's voice, as she lay dying – a dry, whispering, husky sound, never to be forgotten, as she said, "Johnnie, promise mother to be good; promise me to be good." He had heard the sweet sound of the death mort winded by the huntsman in the park of Commendone, as he had run down his first stag – in the voice of the girl who cried out with anguish in the pure morning light, he heard for the third or fourth time, a sound which would always be part of his life.

"O, my dear father! Mother! mother! here is my father led away."

She was a tall girl, in a long grey cloak.

Her hair, growing low upon her forehead, and very thick, was the colour of ripe corn. Great eyes of a deep blue, like cut sapphire, shone in the dead white oval of her face. The parted lips were a scarlet eloquence of agony.

By her side was a tall, grey-haired dame, trembling exceedingly.

One delicate white hand flickered before the elder woman's eyes, all blind with tears and anguish.

Then the Doctor's wife cried, "Rowland, Rowland, where art thou?"

Dr. Taylor answered, "Dear wife, I am here."

Then she came to him, and he took a younger girl, who had been clinging to her mother's skirts, his little daughter Mary, in his arms, dismounting from his horse as he did so, with none to stay him. He, his wife, and the tall girl Elizabeth, knelt down and said the Lord's Prayer.

At the sight of it the Sheriff wept apace, and so did divers others of the company, and the salt tears ran down Johnnie's cheeks and splashed upon his breast-plate.

After they had prayed Dr. Taylor rose up and kissed his wife, and shook her by the hand, and said: "Farewell, my dear wife, be of good comfort, for I am quiet in my conscience. God shall stir up a father for my children."

After that he kissed his daughter Mary and said, "God bless thee and make thee His servant," and kissing Elizabeth also he said, "God bless thee. I pray you all stand strong and steadfast unto Christ His Word, and keep you from idolatry."

The tall lady clung to him, weeping bitterly. "God be with thee, dear Rowland," she said; "I shall, with God's grace, meet thee anon in heaven."

Then Johnnie saw the serving-man, a broad, thick-set fellow, with a keen, brown face, who had been standing a little apart, come up to Dr. Taylor. He was holding by the hand a little boy of ten years or so, with wide, astonished eyes, Thomas, the Doctor's son.

When Dr. Taylor saw them he called them, saying, "Come hither, my son Thomas."

John Hull lifted the child, and sat him upon the saddle of the horse by which his father stood, and Dr. Taylor put off his hat, and said to the members of the party that stood there looking at him: "Good people, this is mine own son, begotten of my body in lawful matrimony; and God be blessed for lawful matrimony."

Johnnie upon his horse was shaking uncontrollably, but at these last words he heard an impatient jingle of accoutrements by his side, and looking, saw that the face of His Highness was fierce and angry that an ordained priest should speak thus of wedlock.

But this was only for a passing moment; the young man's eyes were fixed upon the great clergyman again in an instant.

The priest lifted up his eyes towards heaven, and prayed for

his son. He laid his hand upon the child's head and blessed him; and so delivered the child to John Hull, whom he took by the hand and said, "Farewell, John Hull, the faithfullest servant that ever man had."

There was a silence, broken only by the sobbing of women and a low murmur of sympathy from the rough men-at-arms.

Sir John Shelton heard it and glanced quickly at the muffled figure of the King.

It was a shrewd, penetrating look, and well understood by His Highness. This natural emotion of the escort, at such a sad and painful scene, might well prove a leaven which would work in untutored minds. There must be no more sympathy for heretics. Sir John gave a harsh order, the guard closed in upon Dr. Taylor, there was a loud cry from the Archdeacon's wife as she fell fainting into the arms of the sturdy servant, and the cavalcade proceeded at a smart pace. John looked round once, and this is what he saw – the tall figure of Elizabeth Taylor, fixed and rigid, the lovely face set in a stare of horror and unspeakable grief, a star of sorrow as the dawn reddened and day began.

And now, as they left London, the progress was more rapid, the stern business upon which they were engaged looming up and becoming more imminent every moment, the big man in the centre of the troop being hurried relentlessly to his end.

And so they rode forth to Brentwood, where, during a short stay, Sir John Shelton and his men caused to be made for Dr. Taylor a close hood, with two holes for his eyes to look out at,

and a slit for his mouth to breathe at. This they did that no man in the pleasant country ways, the villages or little towns, should speak to him, nor he to any man.

It was a practice that they had used with others, and very wise and politic.

"For," says a chronicler of the time, "their own consciences told them that they led innocent lambs to the slaughter. Wherefore they feared lest if the people should have heard them speak or have seen them, they might have been more strengthened by their godly exhortations to stand steadfast in God's Word, to fly the superstitions and idolatries of the Papacy."

All the way Dr. Taylor was joyful and merry, as one that accounted himself going to a most pleasant banquet or bridal. He said many notable things to the Sheriff and the yeomen of the guard that conducted him, and often moved them to weep through his much earnest calling upon them to repent and to amend their evil and wicked living. Oftentimes, also, he caused them to wonder and rejoice, to see him so constant and steadfast, void of all fear, joyful in heart, and glad to die. At one time during their progress he said: "I will tell you, I have been deceived, and, as I think, I shall deceive a great many. I am, as you see, a man that hath a very great carcase, which I thought would have been buried in Hadley churchyard, if I died in my bed, as I well hoped I should have done; but herein I see I was deceived. And there are a great number of worms in Hadley churchyard, which should have had a jolly feed upon this carrion, which they have looked

for many a day. But now I know we are to be deceived, both I and they; for this carcase must be burnt to ashes; and so shall they lose their bait and feeding, that they looked to have had of it."

Sir John Shelton, who was riding by the side of Commendone, and who was now sober enough, the wine of his midnight revels having died from him, turned to Johnnie with a significant grin as he heard Dr. Taylor say this to his guards.

Shelton was coarse, overbearing, and a blackguard, but he had a keen mind of a sort, and was of gentle birth.

"Listen to this curtail dog, Mr. Commendone," he said, with a sneer. "A great loss to the Church, i' faith. He talketh like some bully-rook or clown of the streets. And these are the men who in their contumacy and their daring deny the truth of Holy Church – " He spat upon the ground with disgust.

Commendone nodded gravely. His insight was keener far than the other's. He saw, in what Bishop Heber afterwards called "the coarse vigour" of the Archdeacon's pleasantries, no foolish irreverence indeed, but the racy English courage and humour of a saintly man, resolved to meet his earthly doom brightly, and to be an example to common men.

Johnnie was the son of a bluff Kentish squire. He knew the English soil, and all the stoic hardy virtues, the racy mannerisms which spring from it. Courtier and scholar, a man of exquisite refinement, imbued with no small share of foreign grace and courtliness, there was yet a side of him which was thoroughly English. He saw deeper than the coarse-mouthed captain at his

side.

The voices of those who had gathered round the porch of St. Botolph's without Aldgate still rang in his ears.

The Sheriff and his company, when they heard Dr. Rowland Taylor jesting in this way, were amazed, and looked one at another, marvelling at the man's constant mind, that thus, without any fear, made but a jest at the cruel torment and death now at hand prepared for him.

The sun clomb the sky, the woods were green, the birds were all at matins. Through many a shady village they passed where the ripening corn rustled in the breeze, the wood smoke went up in blue lines from cottage and manor house, the clink of the forge rang out into the street as the blacksmiths lit their fires, the milkmaids strode out to find the lowing kine in the pastures. It was a brilliant happy morning as they rode along through the green lanes, a very bridal morning indeed.

When they were come within two miles of Hadley, Dr. Taylor desired for a while to light off his horse. They let him do it, and the Sheriff at his request ordered the hood to be removed from him.

The whole troop halted for a minute or two, and the Doctor, says the chronicler, "leaped and set a frisk or twain as men commonly do in dancing. 'Why, Master Doctor,' quoth the Sheriff, 'how do you now?' He answered, 'Well, God be praised, good Master Sheriff, never better; for now I know I am almost at home. I have not pass two stiles to go over, and I am even at

my father's house.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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