Reid Mayne

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Содержание

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Prologue

There is no page in England's history so bright, nor of which Englishmen have such reason to be proud, as that covering the period between 1640 and 1650. This glorious decade was ushered in by the election of the "Long Parliament," and I challenge the annals of all nations, ancient or modern, to show an assembly in which sat a greater number of statesmen and patriots. Brave as pure, fearless in the discharge of their difficult and dangerous duties, they faltered not in the performance of them – shrank not from impeaching a traitor to his country, and bringing his head to the block, even when it carried a crown. True to their consciences, as to their constituencies, they left England a heritage of honour that for long haloed her escutcheon, and even to this hour throws its covering screen over many a deed of shame.

"Be a King?"

"Am I not one?"

"In name – nothing more. Ah! were I a man and in your place?"

"What would you do?"

"Give your island churls a taste of kingship, as we know it in France. My brother wouldn't let his subjects so beard him. Oh, it's abominable!"

"Ah, *chère*; for subjects your brother has a very different sort of people to deal with. In France they're not yet come to clamouring for what they call their rights and liberties. Here in England they've got Magna Charta into their heads – to a craze."

"I'd have it out of their heads, or have their heads off. *Ciel*! I'd reign King as King should, or resign. No! not resign. Sooner than that I'd waste the country with fire and sword – make it a wilderness."

It was Henrietta, wife of Charles the First, who thus expressed herself to her husband. They were alone in the gardens of Whitehall Palace, sauntering side by side on a terrace overlooking the Thames, the afternoon being an unusually fine one. As they made a turn which brought Westminster Hall before their eyes, the angry fire in those of the Queen flashed up again, and she added —

"Anything but be dictated to by that *canaille* of a Parliament! Anything but let them go on as now?"

"How am I to hinder it, Henriette?" the King timidly interrogated.

"Dismiss – send them packing back to their constituencies, and let them prate away there as much as they please. Dissolve and do without them, as you've done before."

"That would be to do without the money we so much need. My subjects are determined to resist every tax levied under Privy Seal or otherwise. I can no longer raise loan or sell monopoly. Your own secretary, Sir John Wintour, has just been telling me how the people of Dean Forest have been harassing him about the grant we gave him of its timber and mines. Impossible now to obtain the most insignificant supplies without their being sanctioned by this *cabal* called Parliament."

"Then make the *cabal* sanction them."

"But how, *chère*?"

"Have a score or two of them arrested – lodged in the Tower; and let Monsieur Tom Lunsford take care of them. He'll soon cure them of their seditious inclinings."

"To do that were as much as my crown's worth."

"If't be worth no more, you may as well cease wearing it. Fling it into the Thames, or melt it down and sell it to the Ludgate Street goldsmiths for old metal. Shame of you, Charles! You talk of kingly rights, yet fail to exercise them – fear it?"

"My subjects talk of rights, too."

"Yes, and you encourage them – by your timidity. Ever on your knees begging this and begging that, when a true king would command. Subjects, indeed! more like our masters. But I'd teach them obedience. What would they be without a king? What were they born for but to administer to our wants and our pleasures?"

Words worthy of a Medici; the sentiments of a queen two centuries and a half ago. Yet not so very different from those entertained by most Royal personages at the present day and hour. But few of them who would not sit placidly upon their thrones, see subjects slain, and realms reduced to desolation, rather than resign crown or yield up one iota of what they are pleased to call their prerogative. How could it be otherwise? Environed by sycophantic flatterers, heads bowing, knees bending, tongues eternally bepraising; things in human shape giving them adoration as to God Himself – ay, greater than to God – how could it be otherwise? Not so strange that this proud, pampered woman, from her cradle accustomed to such slavish obedience, should verily believe it but her due.

"*Their* rights?" she continued, with a satirical laugh. "An absurd notion they've got into their Saxon skulls. Ah! *mon mari*, were I you for a month – for a week – I'd have it out – stamp it out – I would."

And to give emphasis to her speech, she stamped her foot upon the ground.

A pretty foot it was, and still a handsome woman she, this daughter of the Medicis, notwithstanding her being now somewhat *passé*. Ambitious as Catherine herself – "that mother of a race of kings" – intriguing, notoriously dissolute, not the less did Charles love her. Perhaps the more, for the cuckoo's cry is a wonderful incentive to passion, as to jealousy. He doted upon her with foolish fondness – would have done anything she commanded, even murder. And to more than this was she now instigating him; for it was to stifle, trample out the liberties of a nation, no matter at what cost in life or blood.

Wicked as were her counsels, he would have followed them and willingly, could he have seen his way clear to success. Men still talk of his kindly nature – in face of the fact, proved by irresistible evidence, that he rejoiced at the massacre of the Protestants in Ireland, to say naught of many other instances of inhumanity brought home to this so-called "Martyr King." He may not have been – was not – either a Nero or a Theebaw; and with his favourites and familiars no doubt behaved amicably enough; at the same time readily sacrificing them when danger threatened himself. To his wife his fidelity and devotion were such as to have earned for him the epithet "uxorious," a title which can be more readily conceded. But in his affection for her – whether upheld by respect or not – there was a spice of fear. He knew all about the scandals relating to her mother, Marie of France, with Richelieu, and his own and father's favourite, the assassinated Buckingham, now sleeping in his grave. Charles more than suspected, as did all the world besides, that this same Queen-mother had sent her husband – king as himself – to an untimely tomb by a "cup of cold poison." And oft as the dark Italian eyes of her daughter flashed upon him in anger, he felt secret fear she might some day serve him as had her mother the ill-fated monarch of France. She was of a race and a land whence such danger might be reasonably expected and dreaded. Lucrezia Borgia and Tophana were not the only great female poisoners Italy has produced.

"If you've no care for yourself, then," she went on with untiring persistence, "think of our children. Think of him," and she nodded towards a gaudily-dressed stripling of some ten or twelve, seen coming towards them. It was he who, twenty years after, under the seemingly innocent soubriquet of "Merry Monarch," made sadness in many a family circle, smouching England's escutcheon all over with shame, scarce equalled in the annals of France.

"*Pauvre enfant*!" she exclaimed, as he came up, passing her jewelled fingers through the curls of his hair; "your father would leave you bereft of your birthright; some day to be a king with a worthless crown."

The "pauvre enfant," a sly young wretch, smiled in return for her caresses, looking dark at his father. Young as he was, he knew what was meant, and took sides with his mother. She had already well indoctrinated him with the ideas of Divine Right, as understood by a Medici.

"*Peste*!" exclaimed the King, looking vexed, possibly at the allusion to a successor; "were I to follow your counsels, Madam, it might result in my leaving him no crown at all."

"Then leave him none!" she said in quick return, and with an air of jaunty indifference. "Perhaps better so. I, his mother, would rather see him a peasant than prince, with such a future as you are laying out for him."

"Sire, the Earl of Strafford craves audience of your Majesty."

This was said by a youth in the official costume of the Court, who had approached from the Palace, and stood with head bent before the King.

A remarkably handsome young fellow he was, and the Queen, as she turned her eyes on him, seemed to recover sweetness of temper.

"I suppose my company will be *de trop* now," she said. Then facing towards the youth, and bestowing upon him one of her syren smiles – slyly though – she added, "Here, Eustace; bring this to my boudoir," and she handed him a large book, a *portfeuille* of pictures, she had been all the while carrying.

Whether the King caught sight of that smile, and read something wrong in it, or not, he certainly seemed irritated, hastily interposing —

"No, Henriette, I'd rather have you stay."

"*Con tout plaisir*." A slight cloud upon her brow told the contrary. "Charles, too?"

"No; he can go. Yes, Trevor. Conduct the Lord Strafford hither."

Eustace Trevor, as the handsome youth was called, bowing, turned and went off, the Prince with him. Then said the King —

"I wish you to hear what Strafford has to say on the subject we've been talking of."

"Just what I wish myself," she rejoined, resuming her air of *braverie*. "If you won't listen to me, a weak woman, perhaps you will to him, a man —*one of courage*."

Charles writhed under her speech, the last words of it. Even without the emphasis on them, they were more than an insinuation that he himself lacked that quality men are so proud of, and women so much admire. Almost a direct imputation, as if she had called him "coward!" But there was no time for him to make retort, angry or otherwise, even had he dared. The man seeking audience was already in the garden, and within earshot. So, swallowing his chagrin as he best could, and putting on the semblance of placidity, the King in silence awaited his coming up.

With an air of confident familiarity, and as much nonchalance as though they had been but ordinary people, Strafford approached the royal pair. The Queen had bestowed smiles on him too; he knew he had her friendship – moreover that she was the King's master. He had poured flattery into her ears, as another Minister courtier of later time into those of another queen – perhaps the only point of resemblance between the two men, otherwise unlike as Hyperion to the Satyr. With all his sins, Wentworth had redeeming qualities; he was at least a brave man and somewhat of a gentleman.

"What do you say to this, my lord?" asked the Queen, as he came up. "I've been giving the King some counsel; advising him to dissolve the Parliament, or at least do something to stop them in their wicked courses. Favour us with your opinion, my lord."

"My opinion," answered the Minister, making his bow, "corresponds with that of your Majesty. *Certes*, half-hand measures will no longer avail in dealing with these seditious gabblers. There's a dozen of them deserve having their heads chopped off."

"Just what I've been saying!" triumphantly exclaimed the Queen. "You hear that, *mon mari*?"

Charles but nodded assent, waiting for his Minister to speak further.

"At the pace they're going now, Sire," the latter continued, "they'll soon strip you of all prerogative – leave you of Royalty but the rags."

"*Ciel*, yes!" interposed the Queen. "And our poor children! What's to become of them?"

"I've just been over to the House," proceeded Strafford; "and to hear them is enough to make one tear his hair. There's that Hampden, with Heselrig, Vane, and Harry Martin – Sir Robert Harley too – talking as if England had no longer a king, and they themselves were its rulers."

"Do you tell me that, Strafford?"

It was Charles himself who interrogated, now showing great excitement, which the Queen's "I told you so" strengthened, as she intended it.

"With your Majesty's permission, I do," responded the Minister.

"By God's splendour!" exclaimed the indignant monarch, "I'll read them a different lesson – show them that England *has* a king – one who will hereafter reign as king should – absolute – absolute!"

"Thank you, *mon ami*," said the Queen, in a side whisper to Strafford, as she favoured him with one of her most witching smiles, "He'll surely do something now."

The little bit of by-play was unobserved by Charles, the gentleman-usher having again come up to announce another applicant for admission to the presence: an historical character, too – historically infamous – for it was Archbishop Laud.

Soon after the oily ecclesiastic was seen coming along in a gliding, stealthy gait, as though he feared giving offence by approaching royalty too brusquely. His air of servile obsequiousness was in striking contrast with the bold bearing of the visitor who had preceded him. As he drew near, his features, that bore the stamp of his low birth and base nature, were relaxed to their meekest and mildest; a placid smile playing on his lips, as though they had never told a lie, or himself done murder!

Au fait to all that concerned the other three – every secret of Court and Crown – for he was as much the King's Minister as Strafford, he was at once admitted to their council, and invited to take part in their conspirings. Appealed to, as the other had been, he gave a similar response. Strong measures should be taken. He knew the Queen wished it so, for it was not his first conference with her on that same subject.

Strafford was not permitted time to impart to his *trio* of listeners the full particulars of the cruel scheme, which some say, and with much probability, had its origin in Rome. For the guests of the gay Queen, expected every afternoon at Whitehall, began to arrive, interrupting the conference.

Soon the palace garden became lustrous with people in splendid apparel, the *elite* of the land still adhering to the King's cause – plumed cavaliers, with dames old and young, though youth predominated, but not all of high degree, either in the male or female element. As in modern garden parties given by royalty, there was a mixture, both socially and morally, strange even to grotesqueness. The Franco-Italian Queen, with all her grand ideas of Divine Right and high Prerogative, was not loth to lay them down and aside when they stood in the way of her pleasures. She could be a very leveller where self-interest required it; and this called for it now. The King's failing popularity needed support from all sides, classes, and parties, bad or good, humble or gentle; and in the assemblage she saw around her – there by her own invitation – such high bloods as Harry Jermyn, Hertford, Digby, Coningsby, Scudamore, and the like, touched sleeves with men of low birth and lower character – very reprobates, as Lunsford, afterwards designated "the bloody," and the notorious desperado, David Hide! The feminine element was equally paralleled by what may be seen in many "society" gatherings of the present day – virtuous ladies brushing skirts with stage courtesans, and others who figure under the name of "professional beauties," many of them bearing high titles of nobility, but now debasing them.

Henrietta, in her usual way, had a pleasant word and smile for all; more for the men than the women, and sweeter for the younger ones than the old ones. But even to the gilded youth they were not

distributed impartially. Handsome Harry Jermyn, hitherto reigning favourite, and having the larger share of them, had reason to suspect that his star was upon the wane, when he saw the Queen's eyes ever and anon turned towards another courtier handsome as himself, with more of youth on his side – Eustace Trevor. The latter, relieved from his duty as gentleman-usher, had joined the party in the garden. Socially, he had all right to be there. Son of a Welsh knight, he could boast of ancestry old as Caractacus, some of his forbears having served under Harry of Monmouth, and borne victorious banners at Agincourt. But boasting was not in Eustace Trevor's line, nor conceit of any sort – least of all vanity about his personal appearance. However handsome others thought him, he himself was quite unconscious of it. Equally so of the Queen's admiration; callous to the approaches she had commenced making, to the chagrin of older favourites. Not that he was of a cold or passionless nature; simply because Henriette de Medici, though a Queen, a beautiful woman as well, was not the one destined to inspire his first passion. For as yet he knew not love. But recently having become attached to the Court in an official capacity, he thought only of how he might best perform the duties that had been assigned him.

Though there might be many envies, jealousies, even bitter heartburnings among the people who composed that glittering throng, they were on the whole joyous and jubilant. A whisper had gone round of the King's determination to return to his old ways, and once more boldly confront what they called the aggressions of the Parliament. These concerned them all, for they were all of the class and kind who preyed upon the people. Groups gathered here and there were merry in mutual congratulations on their fine prospects for the future; hoping that, like the past, it would afford them free plunder of the nation's purse and resources – ship tax, coal and conduit money once more, loans by Privy Seal, and sale of monopolies – all jobberies and robberies restored!

But just at that moment of general rejoicing, as a bombshell bursting in the midst of a military camp or regiment of soldiers in close column, came a thing that, first setting them in a flutter, soon seriously alarmed them. A thing of human shape withal; a man in official robes, the uniform of a Parliamentary usher from the Lords. He was announced as waiting outside, rather claiming than craving an interview, which the King dared not deny him.

Summoned into the Audience Chamber, where Charles had gone to receive him, he presented the latter with a document, the reading of which caused him to tremble and turn pale. For it was a Bill of Attainder that had been agreed to by both Houses against Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford. The fluttering among the courtiers became fright, when the King, returning to the garden, made known the usher's errand. To his familiars at first, but it soon passed from lip to lip and ear to ear. None seemed so little affected as Strafford himself. Sin-hardened, he was also endowed with indomitable courage, and maintained a bold, high bearing to the last of his life, even to the laying his head upon the block – an episode which soon after succeeded, – the craven monarch signing his death warrant as if it had been a receipt for one of his loans by Privy Seal.

Far more frightened by the Parliamentary message was Archbishop Laud. For him no more pleasure that day in the gardens of Whitehall. His smiles and simpering all gone, with pallid cheek and clouded brow, the wretched ecclesiastic wandered around among the courtiers, seeming distraught. And so was he. For in that Bill of Attainder he read his own doom – read it aright.

Grand, glorious Parliament, that knew not only how to impeach, but punish the betrayers of the people! Knew also how to maintain its own dignity and honour; as on a later occasion, when the King, once more maddened by the stinging taunts of his wicked wife, entered the august assembly with an escort of bullies and bravoes – Lunsford and Hide among them – to arrest six of England's most illustrious patriots: an attempt eminently unsuccessful – an intrusion handsomely resented. As the disappointed monarch and his disreputable following turned to go out again, it was with a wonderful come-down in their swagger. For along the line of seats, on both sides of the House, they saw men with scowling faces and hats on their heads; heard, too, in chorus clearly, loudly repeated, the significant cry – "Privilege!"

Chapter One
A Sword Duel in the Saddle

"He who is not a Republican must either have a bad head or a bad heart."

The speaker was a man of military mien, cavalry arm, as could be told by his seat in the saddle – for he was on horseback. Not in military uniform, however, but dressed in a plain doublet of dark grey cloth, with a broad Vandyke collar, high-crowned hat, buff boots reaching above the knees, and turned over at the tips. Nor did his wearing a sword certify to his being a soldier. In those days no one went without such weapon, especially when on a journey, as he was. Thirty, or thereabouts, he looked a little older through his complexion being sun-browned, as from foreign service or travel; which had also left its traces in his hair, a strand or two of silver beginning to show in a *chevelure* otherwise coal-black. His fine sweeping moustaches, however, were still free from this betrayer of middle age; while his well-balanced figure, lithe and tersely set, bespoke the activity of a yet youthful manhood. His features, oval and regular, were of a type denoting firmness; handsome, too, with their tint of bronze, which lent interest to them, lit up as they were by the flashing of eagle eyes. For flash these did excitedly, almost angrily, as he so declared himself. By his speech he should be a Puritan, of extremest views; for that he meant what he said was as evident from the emphasis given to his words as from the expression on his face. Still, his hair showed not the close crop of the "Roundhead;" instead, fell down in curling luxuriance as affected by the "Cavalier;" while a plume of cock's feathers set jauntily on the side of his hat gave him more the air of the latter than the former, in contradiction to the sentiment expressed.

There could be no mistaking to which belonged the personage to whom he addressed his speech. Of the Cavalier class sure, as the effect it produced upon him would have told of itself. But the style of his dress, air, bearing, everything proclaimed him one. A youth not yet turned twenty, in garb of silken sheen; coat and trunks of rich yellow satin, Cordovan leather boots, with a wide fringe of lace around the tops; spurs gilt or of gold, and a beaver over which waved a *panache* of ostrich feathers, upheld in a jewelled clasp. His sword belt of silk velvet was elaborately embroidered, the needlework looking as though it came from the fingers of a lady who had worked with a will and *con amore*; the gauntlets of his white gloves ornamented in a similar fashion by the same. Handsome he, too, but of manly beauty, quite differing from that of the other, even to contrast. With a bright, radiant complexion, and blonde hair falling in curls over his cheeks, yet unbearded, his features were of the type termed aristocratic; such as Endymion possessed, and Phidias would have been delighted to secure for a model. Habitually and openly wearing a gentle expression, there was, at the same time, one more latent, which bespoke intellectual strength and courage of no common kind. Passionate anger, too, when occasion called for it, seeming to say, "Don't put upon me too much, or you'll find your mistake."

Just such a cast came over them as he listened to what the other said; a declaration like defiance, flung in his teeth. Although meant as the clincher of a political argument which had been for some time going on between them, the young Cavalier, taken aback by its boldness, and doubtful of having heard aright, turned sharply upon the other, asking, —

"What's that you said, sir?"

"That the man who is not a Republican must either have a bad head or a bad heart."

This time more emphatically, as though nettled by the tone of the other's interrogative.

"Indeed!" exclaimed the youth reining up, for they were riding along a road.

"Indeed, yes," returned the older man, also drawing bridle. "Or if you prefer it in another form, he who is not a Republican must be either a knave or a fool."

"You're a knave to say so!" cried the silken youth, whose rising wrath had now gathered to a head, his hand as he spoke crossing to the hilt of his sword.

"Well, youngster," rejoined the other, seeming, on the contrary, to become calmer, and speaking with a composure strange under the circumstances, "that's speech plain enough, and rude enough. It almost tempts me to retort by calling you a fool. But I won't; only, if you value your life you must withdraw your words."

"Not one of them! Never, so long as I wear a sword. You shall eat yours first?" and he whipped out his rapier.

Though journeying side by side, they were quite strangers to one another, an accident having brought them together upon the road, both going in the same direction. It was up the steep declivity leading from the town of Mitcheldean into the Forest, near the point where now stands a mansion called "The Wilderness." Nor were they altogether alone, two other horsemen, their respective body servants, riding at a little distance behind. It was after surmounting the slope, and having got upon level ground, that their conflict of words reached the climax described, likely to end in one of blows. For to this the fiery youth seemed determined on pushing it.

Not so the other. On the contrary, he still sat composedly in his saddle, no sign of drawing sword, exhibiting a *sang froid* curiously in contrast with the warmth he had shown in the wordy disputation. It surely could not be cowardice? If so, it must be of the most craven kind, after that demand for withdrawal of the insulting words.

And as such the Cavalier conceived, or misconceived, it, crying out, —

"Draw, caitiff! Defend yourself, if you don't want me to kill you in cold blood!"

"Ha-ha-ha!" laughed the other, lightly and satirically. "It's just because I don't want to kill *you* in cold blood that I hesitate baring my blade."

"A subterfuge – a lie!" shouted the youth, stung to madness by the implied taunt of his inferiority. "Do your best and worst. Draw, sirrah, or I'll run you through. Draw, I say!"

"Oh, don't be in such a hurry. If I must I must, and, to oblige you, will, though it dislikes me to do murder – all the more that you've a spark of spirit. But – "

"Do it if you can," interrupted the Cavalier, unheeding the compliment. "I've no fear of your murdering *me*. Maybe the boot will be on the other leg."

Again that strange expression came over the face of the older man, half-admiration, half-compassion, with a scarce discernible element of anger in it. Even yet he appeared reluctant to draw his sword, and only did so when the opprobrious epithet *Lâche*– for the Cavaliers spoke a smattering of French – was flung into his teeth by his now furious antagonist. At this, unsheathing, he called out, —

"Your blood be on your own head. To guard!"

"For God and the King!" cried the challenger, as he tightened grasp on hilt and rein, setting himself firmly in the saddle.

"For God and the People!" followed the response antagonistic.

A prick of the spur by both, a bound forward, and their blades crossed with a clash, their horses shoulder to shoulder. But on the instant of engaging, that of the Cavalier, frayed by the clink of the steel and its flash in the dazzling sunlight, reared up, pivoting round to the right. This brought his rider left side to his antagonist, giving the latter an advantage: and so decided, it seemed as though he could bring the affair to an end at the moment of commencement. For his own better-trained steed had stood ground, and wanted only another touch of the spur to carry him close enough for commanding the bridle arm of his adversary, and all under it, when with a lunge he might thrust him through. Surely he could have done this! Yet neither spur nor sword were so exerted. Instead, he sat quietly in his saddle, as if waiting for his adversary to recover himself! Which the latter soon did, wheeling short round, and again furiously engaging; by a second misconception, unaware of the mercy shown him. This time as they came to the "engage" the Cavalier's horse behaved better, standing ground till

several thrusts and parades were exchanged between them. Clearly the silk-clad youth was no novice at fencing, but as clearly the other was a master of it, and equally accomplished as a horseman; his horse, too, so disciplined as to give him little bother with the bridle. A spectator, if a connoisseur in the *art d'escrime*, could have told how the combat would end – must end – unless some accident favoured the younger combatant. As it was, even the Fates seemed against him, his horse again rearing *en pirouette*, and to the wrong side, placing him once more at the mercy of his antagonist. And again the latter scorned, or declined, taking advantage of it!

When the angry youth for the third time confronted him, it was with less fury in his look, and a lowered confidence in his skill. For now he not only knew his own inferiority as a swordsman, but was troubled with an indistinct perception of the other's generosity. Not clear enough, however, to restrain him from another trial; and their swords came together in a third crossing.

This time the play was short, almost as at the first. Having engaged the Cavalier's blade in *carte*, and bound it, the self-proclaimed Republican with a quick *flanconnade* plunged the point of his own straight for his adversary's wrist. Like the protruded tongue of a serpent, it went glistening into the white gauntlet, which instantly showed a spot of red, with blood spurting out; while the rapier of the Cavalier, struck from his grasp, flew off, and fell with a ring upon the road.

Chapter Two
Foes Become Friends

The young Cavalier was now altogether at the mercy of his older, and as proved, abler antagonist; knew the latter could take his life, and had the right, as well as good reason, from the great provocation given him in that shower of insulting epithets – the latest of them "*Lâche*!" For all, he quailed not, neither made attempt to elude the next thrust of the victorious sword. Instead, stood his ground, crying out, —

"You have conquered! You can kill me!"

"Kill you?" rejoined the victor, with the same light laugh as before. "That's just what I've been endeavouring *not* to do. But it has cost me an effort – all my skill. Had you been an ordinary swordsman I'd have disarmed you at the first pass after engaging. I've done it with others, half a dozen or more. With you, 'twas just as much as I was able, without absolutely taking your life – a thing far from my thoughts, and as far from my wishes. And now that all's over, and we've neither of us *murdered* the other, am I to say 'Surrender'?"

He still spoke laughingly, but without the slightest tone of satire, or show of exultation.

"You can command it," promptly responded the vanquished youth, now doubly vanquished. "I cry 'Quarter' – crave it, if you like."

It was no fear of death made him thus humbly submit, but a sudden revulsion, an outburst of gratitude, to a conqueror alike merciful and generous.

Ere this their attendants had got upon the ground, seeming undecided whether to pitch in with their masters, or cross swords on their own account. Both had drawn them, and waited but word or sign, scowling savagely at each other. Had it come to blows between the men, the result, in all probability, would have been as with their masters; the Cavalier's lightweight varlet looking anything but a match for the stout-bodied, veteranlike individual who was henchman to his antagonist. As it was, they had not resolved themselves till the combat came to an end. Then hearing the word "quarter," and seeing signs of amity restored, they slipped their blades back into the scabbards, and sate awaiting orders.

Only one of them received any just then – he the heavy one.

"Dismount, Hubert," commanded his master, "and return his weapon to this young gentleman, who, as you can testify, well deserves to wear it. And now, sir," he continued to the young gentleman himself, "along with your sword let me offer you some apologies, which are owing. I admit my words were rather rough, and call for qualification, or, to speak more correctly, explanation. When I said, that the man who is not a Republican must be deficient either in head or heart, I meant one who has reached the years of discretion, and seen something of the world – as, for instance, myself. At your age I too was a believer in kings – even the doctrine of Divine Right – brought up to it. Possibly, when you hear my name you'll admit that."

"You will give me your name?" asked the other, eagerly. "I wish it, that I may know to whom I am beholden for so much generosity."

"Very generous on your part to say say I am Sir Richard Walwyn."

"Ah! A relative of the Scudamores, are you not?"

"A distant relative. But I've not seen any of them lately, having just come back from the Low Countries, where I've been fighting a bit. In better practice from that, with my hand still in, which may account for my having got the better of you," and he again laughed lightly.

The young Cavalier protested against the generous admission, and then went on to say he knew the Scudamores well – especially Lord Scudamore, of Holme Lacey.

"I've often met his lordship at the Palace," was the concluding remark.

"At what palace, pray?" inquired Sir Richard.

"Oh! Whitehall. I did not think of specifying."

"Which proves that you yourself come from it? One of the King's people, I take it; or in the Queen's service, more like?"

"I was, but not now. I've been at Court for the last few months in the capacity of gentleman-usher."

"And now? But I crave pardon. It is rude of me to cross-question you thus."

"Not at all, Sir Richard. You have every right. After being so frank with me, I owe you equal frankness. I've given up the appointment I held at Court, and am now on my way home – to my father's house in Monmouthshire."

"Your father is – ?"

"Sir William Trevor."

"Ah! now I can understand why your blood boiled up at my strenuous defence of the Parliament – the son of Sir William Trevor. But we won't enter upon politics again. After blows, words are inadmissible, as ungracious. Your father's house is near Abergavenny, if I remember rightly?"

"It is."

"That's good twenty-seven miles from here. You don't purpose going on there to-night?"

"No; I intend putting up for the night at Monmouth."

"Well, that's within the possibilities; but not with daylight, unless you press your horse hard – and he looks rather jaded."

"No wonder. I've ridden him all the way from Witney, in Oxfordshire, since six this morning."

"He must be good stuff to stand it, and show the spirit he did just now. But for all he seems rather badly done up – another reason for my having got the better of you."

At this both smiled, the young Cavalier, as before, refusing to accept the complimentary acknowledgment.

"A pity," ran on Sir Richard, "to press the poor animal farther to night – that is, so far as Monmouth. It's all of ten miles yet, and the road difficult – pitches up and down. You should rest him nearer, by way of reward for his noble performance of the day."

"Indeed, I was thinking of it; had half made up my mind to sleep at Coleford."

"Ah! you mus'n't stop at Coleford, much less sleep there."

"And why not?"

"The Coleford people are mad angry with the King, as are most others in the Forest. No wonder, from the way Sir John Wintour has been behaving to them since he got the monopoly grant of what his Majesty had no right to give – rights that are theirs. Their blood's up about it, and just now to appear in the streets of Coleford dressed as you are, cavalier and courtier fashion, might be attended with danger."

"I'll risk – defy it!"

"Bravely spoken, and I've no doubt you'd bravely do both. But there's no need for your doing one or the other."

"If you describe these Coleford fellows aright, how can I help it, Sir Richard? My road passes through their town."

"True, but there's a way you may avoid it."

"Oh! I'm not going to skulk round, taking bypaths, like a thief or deer-stealer. I'll give them a fight first."

"And that fight might be your last – likely would, Master Trevor. But no. You've fought your way *into* the Forest so gallantly, it behoves him you all but conquered to see you safe out of it. To do which, however, I must ask you to give up all thoughts of sleeping either at Monmouth or Coleford, and be my guest for the night."

"But where, Sir Richard? I did not know that you had a house in the Forest."

"Nor have I. But one of my friends has; and I think I can promise you fair hospitality in it – by proxy. Besides, that little hole I've made in your hand – sorry at having made it – needs looking to without delay, and my friend has some skill as a surgeon. I could offer some other inducements that might help in deciding you – as, for instance, a pair of pretty faces to see. But coming from the Court of Queen Henriette, with her galaxy of grand dames, perhaps you've had a surfeit of that sort of thing."

The young courtier shifted uneasily in his saddle, a slight blush coming over his cheeks, as though the words rather gave him pain.

"If not," continued Sir Richard, without heeding these indices of emotion, "I can promise to show you something rare in the way of feminine beauty. For that I'll back Sabrina and Vaga against all your maids of honour and court ladies – the Queen included – and win with either."

"*Sabrina! Vaga*! Singular names! May I ask who the ladies are?"

"You may do more – make their acquaintance, if you consent to my proposal. You will?"

"Sir Richard, your kindness overpowers me. I am at your service every way."

"Thanks! Let us on, then, without delay. We've yet full five miles of road before us, ere we can reach the cage that holds this pair of pretty birds. *Allons*!"

At which he gave his horse the spur, Trevor doing the same; and once more the two rode side by side; but friendly now – even to affection.

Chapter Three
Beautiful Forest Birds

In all England's territory there is no district more interesting than the Forest of Dean. Historically it figures in our earliest annals, as borderland and bulwark of the ancient Silures, who, with Caractacus at their head, held the country around, defending it on many a hard-fought field against the legionaries of Ostorius Scapula. Centuries after, it again became the scene of sanguinary strife between the descendants of these same Silures – then better known as Britons – and the Saxon invaders; and still farther down the stream of time another invasion wasted it – Norman and Saxon arrayed on the same side against Welsh – still the same warlike stock, the sons of Siluria. This conflict against odds – commencing with the Norman William, and continued, or renewed, down through the days made illustrious by the gallant Llewellyn – only came to an end with those of the equally gallant Glendower, when the fires of Welsh independence, now and then blazing up intermittently, were finally and for ever trodden out.

Many a grand historic name is associated with this same Forest of Dean – famed warriors and famous or infamous kings. The Conqueror himself was hunting in it when the news reached him of the rising in Northumberland, and he swore "By the splendour of God, he would lay that land waste by fire and sword!" – a cruel oath, as cruelly kept. In its dark recesses the wretched Edward the Second endeavoured to conceal himself, but in vain – dragged thence to imprisonment in the dungeons of Berkeley Castle, there to die. And within its boundaries was born that monarch of most romantic fame, Harry of Monmouth, hero of Agincourt.

And the day was approaching – had, in fact, come – when other names that brighten the page of England's history were to fling their halo of illumination over the Forest of Dean – those of the chivalrous Waller, the brave but modest Massey, Essex, Fairfax, and greatest, most glorious of all, that of Cromwell himself. It was to be darkened too, as by the shadow of death – ay, death itself – through many a raid of marauding Cavaliers, with the ruffian Rupert at their head.

Dropping history, and returning to its interest otherwise, the Forest of Dean claims attention from peculiarities of many kinds. Geologically regarded, it is an outlier of the carboniferous system of South Wales, from which it is separated by a breadth of the Devonian that has been denuded between – so widely separated as to have similitude to an island in the far-off ocean. An elevated island, too, rising above the "Old Red," through successive strata of shales, mountain limestone, and millstone grit, to nearly a thousand feet higher than the general level of the surrounding *terrain*. Towards this, on every side, and all round for miles and tens of miles, it presents a *façade* not actually precipitous, but so steep and difficult of ascent as to make horses breathe hard climbing it; while in loaded cart or wagon, teams have to be doubled. Just such a "pitch" was that on whose top the bitter war of words between Eustace Trevor and Sir Richard Walwyn had come to blows.

But, though thus high in air, the Forest of Dean does not possess the usual characteristics of what are termed *plateaux*, or elevated tablelands. As a rule these show a level surface, or with but gentle undulations, while that of the Forest is everywhere intersected by deep valleys and ravines.

A very interesting geological fact is offered in the surface formation of this singular tract of country, its interior area being in most places much lower than the rim around it. The peculiarity is due to the hard carboniferous limestone, which forms its periphery, having better resisted denudation than the softer matrix of the coal measures embraced by it. The disintegrating rains, and the streams, often torrents, their resulting sequence, have here and there cut channels of escape outward – some running west into the Wye, some eastward to espouse the Severn.

Very different is the Forest of Dean now from what it was in those days of which this tale treats – territorially more restricted, both in its boundaries and the area once bearing its name. Then

it extended over the whole triangular space between the two great rivers, from the towns of Ross and Gloucester down to their union in the wide sea-like estuary of the Severn. Changed, too, in the character of its scenery. Now, here and there, a tall chimney may be seen soaring up out of its greenery of trees, and vomiting forth volumes of murky smoke, in striking disagreeable contrast with their verdure. Then there was nothing of this kind; – at least nothing to jar upon the mind, or mar the harmony of nature. Then, too, it was a real forest of grand old trees, with a thick tangle of underwood, luxuriant and shady. For the Court favourite, Sir John Wintour, had not yet wasted it with his five hundred woodcutters, all chopping and hacking away at the same time. It was only after the Restoration he did that; the robber's monopoly granted him by the "Martyr King" having been re-bestowed by the "Merry Monarch."

There were towns in the Forest then, notwithstanding – some of them busy centres as now; but the majority peaceful villages or hamlets; country houses, too, some of pretentious style – mansions, and castles. A few of these yet exist, if in ruins; others known only by record; and still others totally gone out of history – lost even to legend.

The Forest roads were then but bridle paths, or trackways for the pack-horse; no fencing on either side; the narrow list of trodden ground running centrally between wide borderings of grass-grown sward; so that the traveller, if a horseman, had the choice of soft turf for the hoofs of his roadster. Only on the main routes between the larger towns, and those going outward, was there much traffic. The bye-roads had all the character of green lanes, narrow, but now and then debouching into glades, and openings of larger area, where the small Forest sheep – progeny of the Welsh mountaineers – browsed upon pasture, spare and close-cropped, in the companionship of donkeys, and perchance a deer, or it might be a dozen, moving among them in amiable association. The sheep and the donkeys are there still, but the deer, alas! are gone. Many birds that built their nests in the Forest trees, or soared above, are there no more. The eagle makes not now its eyrie in the Coldwell Rocks or soars over Symonds' Yat; even the osprey is but rarely seen pursuing its finny prey in the lower waters of either Wye or Severn. Still, the *falconidae* are to this day represented in the Forest district by numerous species, by the kite and kestrel; the buzzard, Common, Rough-legged, and Honey; by the goshawk and sparrow-hawk; the hobby and harriers; and if last, not least, in estimation, the graceful diminutive merlin.

Birds of bright feathers, too, still flit through the Forest's trees; the noisy jay, the gaudy, green woodpecker, and the two spotted species; with the kingfisher of cerulean hue; while its glades are gladdened by the sweet song of the thrush, the bolder lay of the blackbird; in springtide, the matchless melody of the nightingale – the joyous twittering of linnets and finches, mingling with the softer notes of the cushat and turtle-dove.

On that calm summer evening, when the clinking of swords on Mitcheldean-hill frightened the Forest birds, for a time stilling their voices, on another hill, some three miles distant from the scene of strife, the sweet songsters were being disturbed by intrusion upon their wild-wood domain. Not much disturbed, however, nor could the disturbers be justly characterised as intruders. Even the birds themselves might have been glad to see, and welcome among them, things of brightness and beauty far beyond their own. Women they were, or rather girls, both being under age – for there were but two of them. Sisters, moreover, though there was scarce a trait of resemblance to betray the relationship, either in features or complexion. She who seemed the elder was dark as a gipsy, the other a clear *blonde*, with hair showering over her shoulders, of hue as the beams of the sinking sun that shimmered upon it. For all, both were alike beautiful; in a different way, but unquestionably beautiful. And that they were sisters could be learnt by listening to their conversation: their names, also, as they addressed one another – that of the older, *Sabrina*; the younger, *Vaga*.

They could not be other than the pair of pretty birds spoken of by Sir Richard Walwyn; and, verily, he had not overrated them.

Chapter Four
Out for a Walk

Unlike in other respects, the sisters were unequal in height – the elder being the taller. With some difference in their dress, too, though both wore the ordinary outdoor costume of the day. It was rather graceful than splendid, for the hideous farthingale of the Elizabethan era was then going out of fashion, and their gowns, close-fitting in body and sleeves, displayed the outlines of figures that were perfection. Theirs were not charms that needed heightening by any adornment of dress. However plainly attired, there was in their air and carriage that grace which distinguishes the gentlewoman. Still, the younger was not without affectation of ornament. Her French hood of bright-coloured silk, looped under the chin, was so coifed as to show in a coquettish way her wealth of radiant hair, and beneath the gorget ruff gleamed a necklet of gold, with rings in her ears. There was embroidery, also, on the bodice and sleeves of her gown – doubtless the work of her own fair fingers. In those days ladies, even the grandest dames, were not above using the needle.

Sabrina's hood, of a more sombre hue, was quite as becoming, and more suitable to her darker complexion. Her general attire, too, was appropriate to her character, which was of the staid, sober kind. Both wore strong, thick-soled shoes – being out for a walk – but neither these nor home-knitted stockings, which their short skirts permitted view of, could hinder the eye from beholding feet small and finely-shaped, with high instep and elegant *tournure* of ankles.

Good walkers they were, as could be told by the way they stepped along the Forest road; for they were on one. It was that which ran from Ruardean to Drybrook, and their faces were set in the direction of the latter. Between the two towns a high ridge is interposed, and this they were ascending from the Ruardean side. Before they had reached its summit, Vaga, coming abruptly to a stop, said: —

"Don't you think we've walked far enough?"

"Why? Are you tired?"

"No – not that. But it occurs to me we may be wandering too far from home."

That Sabrina was not wandering might have been told by her step, straightforward, as also her earnest glances, interrogating the road ahead at every turning. As these had been somewhat surreptitiously, though not timidly, given, the other had hitherto failed to notice them. Indeed, Vaga was not all the while by her side, nor keeping step with her. A huge dog of the Old English mastiff breed more occupied her attention; the animal every now and then making a rush at the browsing sheep, and sending them helter-skelter among the trees, his young mistress – for the dog was hers – clapping her hands with delight, and crying him on regardless of the mischief. It was only when no more of the little Welsh muttons were to be seen along the road that she joined her sister, and put in that plea for turning back.

"So far from home!" repeated Sabrina, with feigned surprise. "Why, we haven't come quite two miles – not much over one."

"True; but – "

"But what? Are you afraid?"

"A little – I confess."

"And the cause of your fear? Not wolves? If so, I can release you from it. It's now quite half a century since there was a wolf seen in this Forest; and he – poor, lonely creature, the last of his race – was most unmercifully slain. The Foresters, being mostly of Welsh ancestry, have an hereditary hatred of the lupine species, I suppose from that mischance which befel the infant Llewellyn." Vaga laughed, as she rejoined: – "Instead of having a fear of wolves, I'd like to see one just now. Hector, I'm sure, would show fight; ay, and conquer it, too, as did the famed Beth-Gelert his. Wouldn't you, old Hec? Ay! that you would."

At which the mastiff, rearing up, set his paws against her breast to receive the caressess extended; and, after these being given him, scampered off again in search of more sheep.

"Then what are you afraid of?" asked Sabrina, "Ghosts? There are none of them in the Forest either. If there were, no danger of their showing themselves by daylight, and we'll be back home long before the sun goes down. Ha, ha, ha!"

It was as unusual for the older of the sisters to talk in such a light strain as it was for the younger to speak otherwise. Just then each had a reason for this reversion of their *rôles*.

Further questioned as to the cause of her fear, Vaga made answer, saying, —

"You're merry, sister Sab, and I'm right glad to see you so. But what I meant isn't a matter for jest; instead, something to be really alarmed about."

"When you've told me what it is, I'll give my opinion upon it. If neither wolves nor ghosts, what can it be? Bipeds or quadrupeds?"

"Bipeds, and of the sort most to be dreaded – brutal men."

"Oh! that's it. But what men are there about here deserving to be so characterised?"

"None about here, I hope and believe. But you know, sister, what's going on all around the Forest: those mobs of lawless fellows down at Monmouth and Lydney. Suppose some of them to be coming this way and meet us?"

"I don't suppose it, and needn't. The malignants of Monmouth and Lydney are not likely to be upon this road. If they did, 'twould be at their peril. The men of Ruardean and Drybrook are of a different sort – the right sort. Should we meet any of them, though they may be a little rough in appearance, they won't be rude. No true Forester ever is to a woman, whether lady or not. That they leave to the foreign elements Sir John Wintour has brought to Lydney, and the so-called Cavaliers on the Monmouth side – those braggarts of their blood and gallant bearing, most of them the veriest scum of the country, its gamesters and tapsters, the sweepings of the alehouse and stable! Cavaliers, indeed! who know not politeness to man nor respect for woman; care neither for national honour nor social decency!"

The enlightened young lady spoke with a warmth bordering upon indignation. With truth, too, as might one of her sort now about Tories and Jingoes. But, alas! now there are but few of her sort, youthful and enthusiastic in the cause of liberty; instead, ancient maidens of wealth and title, some of whose ancestors trod the stage playing at charity for the sake of popularity; patronising play-actors and endowing homes for strayed dogs! showing a shameless sympathy with the foul murdering Turk and his red-handed atrocities; last and latest of all, having the effrontery – impertinent as unfeminine – to counsel, ay, dictate, political action to England's people, telling them how they should cast their votes!

What a contrast between their doings and the sayings and sentiments of that young Forest girl – all that lies between the mean and the noble!

"But," she went on, in reference to the *gentlemen* of the gaming-house and hostelry tap-room, "we needn't fear meeting them here, nor anywhere through the Forest. The Foresters – brave fellows – are for the Parliament almost to a man. Should we encounter any of them on our walk, I'll answer for their good behaviour and kind-heartedness – something more, if knowing who we are. Father is a favourite with them for having taken their side against the usurpations of Wintour; though they liked him before that, and I'm proud of their doing so."

"Oh! so am I, Sabrina. I'm as fond of our dear Foresters as you. It isn't of them I had any fear. But, apart from all that, I think it's time we turn our steps homeward. We're surely now two miles from Hollymead; and see! the sun's hastening to go down behind the Welsh hills."

While so delivering herself, she faced round, the Welsh hills being behind their backs as they walked towards Drybrook.

"Hasten as it likes," rejoined Sabrina, "it can't get down for at least another hour. That will give us ample time to go on to the top of the hill and back to Hollymead before supper; which last, if I mistake not, is the chief cause of your anxiety to be at home."

"For shame, Sabrina! You know it isn't – the last thing in my thoughts."

Sabrina did know that; knew, also, she was not speaking her own thoughts, but using subterfuge to conceal them. It was herself had proposed the stroll she seemed so desirous of continuing. To her its termination would not be satisfactory without attaining the summit of the ridge whose slope they were ascending.

Thrown back by what her younger sister had said, but still determined to proceed, without giving the true reason, she bethought herself of one, false though plausible.

"Well, Vag," she laughingly pursued, "I was only jesting, as you know. But there's one thing I hate to do – never could do, that's to half climb a hill without going on to its top. It seems like breaking down or backing out, and crying 'surrender,' – which our dear father has taught us never to do. Up to the summit yonder is but a step now. It won't take us ten minutes more to reach it; besides, I want to see something I haven't set eyes on for a long while – that grand valley through which meanders my namesake, Sabrina. And looking back from there, you can also feast your eyes on that in which wanders yours, Vaga, capricious like yourself. In addition," she added, not heeding her sister's shrug of the shoulders, "we'll there get a better view of a glorious sunset that's soon to be over the Hatteral Hills; and the twilight after will give us ample time to get home before the supper table be set. So, why should you hinder me – to say nothing of yourself – from indulging in a little bit of aesthetics?"

"Hinder you!" exclaimed Vaga, protestingly. "I hinder! You shan't say that."

And at the words she went bounding on upward, like a mountain antelope; not stopping again till she stood on the summit of the hill.

Chapter Five
Waiting and Watching

Following with alacrity, Sabrina was soon again by the side of her sister. But just then no further speech passed between them. Not that both were silent. On the crest of the ridge, treeless and overgrown with gorse, Hector had run foul of a donkey, and after a short chase was holding it at bay. With his barks were mingled cries of encouragement from his mistress, laughter, and patting of her hands, as she hounded him on. Possibly had the Forester, Neddy's owner, come up at that moment, he might not have shown the politeness for which Sabrina had given his fellows credit. But the young lady meant no harm; nor much the mastiff. If he had, there was little danger of his doing it; the creature whose ancestry came from Mesopotamia being able to take care of itself. The demonstrations of the dog – an overfed, good-natured brute – looked as if being made either for his own amusement or that of his young mistress; while the donkey, on the defence, with teeth, and heels, seemed equally to enjoy the fun.

The elder sister, standing apart, had neither eyes nor ears for this bit of hoydenish play. If a thought, it was the fear of giving offence to the ass's owner, should that individual unluckily come along. As no one came, however, she left Vaga to her vagaries, and stood intently gazing upon the landscape spread before her.

A far and varied view she commanded from that elevated spot. First, a deep, wide valley below, trending away to the right, with a tiny stream trickling adown it, and a straggling village, the houses standing apart along its banks – Drybrook. But not as the Drybrook of to-day, showing tall brick chimneys – the monoliths of our own modern time – with their plumes of grey black smoke; cinder-strewn roads running from one to the other, and patches of bare pasture between. Then it was embowered, almost buried, in trees; here and there only a spot of whitewashed walls or a quaint lead window, seen through the thick foliage. Beyond village and stream rose another ridge, with a gradual ascent up to the "Wilderness"; and still farther off – so far as to be just visible – stretched a wide expanse of low-lying champaign country, the valley of the Severn, once the sound of a sea. As the young girl gazed upon it, the sinking sun behind her back, with the Forest highlands beginning to fling the shadows of twilight across the Severn's plain, and the white mist that overhung it, she might well have imagined the waters of ocean once more o'erflowing their ancient bed.

She neither imagined this nor thought of it; in fact saw not the fog, nor gave so much as a second glance to that valley she had professed herself so desirous of viewing. Instead, her eyes were fixedly bent upon the face of the acclivity opposite – more particularly on a riband of road that went winding up through woods from Drybrook to the "Wilderness." And still with the same look of earnest interrogation. What could it mean?

Vaga coming up, after having finished her affair with the donkey, observed the look, and it called forth a fresh display of that persiflage she so delighted in. Hitherto Sabrina had the best of it. Her turn now, and she took advantage of it, saying, —

"Why, sister Sab, you seem to have forgotten all about what you came here for! You're not looking at the Severn at all! Your glances are directed too low for it. And as to the glorious sunset you spoke of, that's going on behind you! Something on the road over yonder seems to be the attraction; though I can see nothing but the road itself."

"Nor I," said Sabrina, a little confused, with just the slightest spot of red again showing on her cheeks. Enough, though, to catch the eye of her suspicious sister, who archly observed, —

"Rather strange, your gazing so earnestly at it, then?"

"Well, yes; I suppose it is."

"But not if you're expecting to see some one upon it."

Sabrina started, the red on her cheeks becoming more pronounced; but she said nothing, since now her secret was discovered, or on the eve of discovery. Vaga's next words left her no longer in doubt.

"Who is he, sister?" she asked with a sly look, and a laugh.

"Who is who?"

"He you expect to see come riding down yonder road. I take it he'll be on horseback?"

"Vaga! you're a very inquisitive creature."

"Have I not some right, after being dragged all the way hither, when I wanted to go home? If you called me a *hungry* creature 'twould be nearer the truth. Jesting apart, I am that – quite famished; so weak I must seek support from a tree."

And with a mock stagger, she brought up against the trunk of a hawthorn that grew near.

Sabrina could not resist laughing too, though still keeping her eyes on the uphill road. It seemed as though she could not take her eyes off it. But the other quickly recovering strength, and more naturally than she had affected feebleness, once more returned to the attack, saying, —

"Sister mine; it's no use you're trying to hoodwink me. You forget that by accident I saw a letter that lately came to Hollymead – at least its superscription. Equally oblivious you appear to be, that the handwriting of a certain gentleman is quite familiar to me, having seen many other letters from the same to father. So, putting that and that together, I've not the slightest doubt that the one of last week, addressed to your sweet self, informed you that on a certain day, hour, afternoon, Sir Richard Walwyn would enter the Forest of Dean by the Drybrook Road on his way to – "

"Vaga, you're a very demon!"

"Which means I've read your secret aright. So you may as well make confession of it."

"I won't; and just to punish you for prying. Curiosity ungratified will be to you very torture, as I know."

"Oh, well! keep it close; it don't signify a bit. One has little care to be told what one knows without telling. If Sir Richard should come to Hollymead, why then six and six make a dozen, don't they?"

Sabrina turned a half-reproachful look on her tormentor, but without making reply.

"You needn't answer," the other went on. "*My* arithmetic's right, and the problem's solved, or will be, by the gentleman spoken of making his appearance any time this day, or – Why, bless me! Yonder he is now, I do believe."

The exclamatory phrase had reference to a horseman seen riding down the road so narrowly watched; though the speaker was not the first to see him. He had been already sighted by Sabrina, and it was the flash of excitement in her eyes that guided those of her sister.

The horseman had not all the road to himself; another coming on behind, but at such short distance as to tell of companionship – that of master and servant. He ahead was undoubtedly a gentleman, as evinced by the bright colour of his dress, with its silken gloss under the sunlight, and the glitter of arms and accoutrements; while the more soberly-attired rider in the rear was evidently a groom or body servant.

As the girls stood regarding, the look in the eyes of the elder, at first satisfied and joyous, began gradually to change. The distance was too great for the identification of either face or figure. All that could be distinguished was that they were men on horseback, with the general hue of their habiliments, and the sparkle of arms and ornaments.

It was just these – their brightness and splendour – as affected the foremost of the two, which had brought the change over Sabrina's countenance. Sir Richard Walwyn was not wont to dress gaudily, but rather the reverse. Still, time had elapsed since she last saw him. He had been abroad, in the Low Countries, and with Gustavus of Sweden, battling for the good cause. The foreign fashions may have changed his ideas about dress and its adornments. But little cared she for that so long as his

heart was unchanged; and that it was so she knew by the letter which had betrayed her own heart's secret to her sister.

Almost simultaneously upon Vaga's features appeared a change too – almost expressing doubt. It became certainty on the instant after, still another replacing it, as she again exclaimed, contradicting herself —

"Bless me, no! That's Reginald Trevor."

Chapter Six
A Cavalier in Love

Reginald Trevor it was, for Vaga was not guessing. Something she saw about the horseman, or his horse, had enabled her to identify him; as she did so, that third and latest change coming over her countenance, giving it also a serious cast.

But nothing compared with that which now showed on the face of her sister. The varied expressions of hopeful anticipation, surprise, delight, then doubt, rapidly succeeding one another, were all past, and in their place a dark shadow sat cloud-like on her brow. In her eyes, too, still scanning the distant horseman, was a look that betokened pain, or at least uneasiness, with something of fear and anger. In truth, the expression on their face, though differing from each other, would have been unreadable to any one who was a stranger to them and Reginald Trevor.

Some knowledge of this gentleman and his antecedents will throw light upon the grave impression seemingly produced upon the two girls by the sight of him.

As the name might indicate, he was kin to the young courtier, late gentleman-usher at Whitehall – his cousin. Different, however, had been their lots in the lottery of life; those of Eustace so far having all come out prizes, while Reginald had been drawing blanks. A dissolute, dissipated father had left the latter nought but a bad name, and the son had little bettered it. Still was he a gallant Cavalier, as the word went, and at least possessed the redeeming quality of courage. He had given proofs of it as an officer in that army sent northward against the Scots, where he had served as a lieutenant under Lunsford. *Per contra*, as the father who begot him, he was given to dissipation, a drinker, dicer, wencher, everything socially disreputable and distasteful to the Parliamentarians, – far more the Puritans, – though neither disgracing or lowering himself in the eyes of his own party – the Cavaliers. If latitudinarianism in morals could be accounted Christian charity, none were endowed with this virtue in a higher degree than they.

Reginald Trevor had the full benefit of their tolerance in that respect: passed among them as a rare good fellow; no harm in him, save what affected himself. To use a common phrase, he was his own worst enemy. Beginning life penniless, he was no better off at the commencement of his military career; and his spendthrift habits had kept him the same ever since. At that hour, when seen coming down the road – save his sword, horse, clothing; and equipments – he could not call anything his own. These, however, were all of the best; for he was a military dandy, and, despite poverty, always contrived to rig himself out in grand array. Just now he was well up in everything, though possibly nothing had been paid for – horse, clothing, nor accoutrements. But he had got a good post, which enabled him to get good credit, and that satisfied him all the same. Thrown out of commission – as Lunsford and others after their return from the North – he had lived for some months in London as best he could; often at his wits' end. But swords were now once more in demand, with men who could wield them; and Sir John Wintour, who had commenced fortifying his mansion at Lydney to hold it for the King, casting about for the right sort to defend it, chose Reginald Trevor as one of them.

For some weeks antecedent to the time of his introduction to the reader, he had been in Sir John's service; acting in a mixed capacity, military and political, with some duties appertaining to the civil branch of administration. These had taken him all over the Forest of Dean, introducing him into many a house where he had hitherto been a stranger. But of all honoured by his visit, there was only one he cared ever returning to. It he could revisit again and again; had done so; and would have been glad to stay by it for the rest of his life. A lone house, too, though a mansion, standing remote from anything that could be called city, or even town; remote from other houses of its class. It may seem strange such a solitary habitation should have attractions for a man of his character; but not when its name is given – for it was Hollymead. This known, it needs no telling why Reginald Trevor was

attracted thither; only to specify which of the two girls was the loadstone that drew him. Even this may be guessed – not likely Sabrina, but very likely Vaga. And Vaga it was. He had fallen in love with her, passionately, madly; and, stranger still, purely; for, in all likelihood, it was the first honest love of his life. Honest it was, however; and honestly he had been acting so far; his courtship respectful, and free from the bold rude advances which, as a rule, marked the conduct of the Cavaliers. For, despite all said to the contrary, their behaviour to women was more "gallantry" than gallant, and anything but chivalrous.

But, although behaving his best, Reginald Trevor had not prospered in his suit; on the contrary received a check which brought it to an abrupt ending for the time, and it might be for ever. This in the shape of a hint that his visits to Hollymead House were neither welcome nor desirable, rather the reverse. Not given him by the girl herself – she did not even know of it, – but conveyed by her father privately and quietly, yet firmly. Of course it was taken, and the visits discontinued.

That was but a fortnight ago, and yet Reginald Trevor was once more on his way to Hollymead! But very different the cause carrying him thither now to that which had oft taken him before; different his feelings, too, though not as regarded the young lady. For her they were the same – his passion hot as ever. And yet was it a flame burning blindly, without a word of encouragement to fan or keep it alive. Never once had she spoken to tell him his love was reciprocated; never given him smile or look that could be interpreted in that sense. For all this, he so interpreted some she had bestowed on him. Successes, conquests many, had made him vain, and he deemed himself irresistible – fancied he would conquer her, too.

Nevertheless, he felt less confident now. That rupture of relations had become a grievous obstacle. Nor was he on the way to Hollymead with any hope of being able to bind up the broken threads; instead, his errand thither had for object that which was sure further to sever them. It was not of his own seeking, and he had entered upon it with reluctance.

Dark and gloomy was the shadow on his face as he rode under that of the trees. At intervals it became a scowl, with resentment blazing up in his eyes, as he thought of that dismissal, so wounding to his self-esteem, so insulting. But he was armed with that which would give him a *revanche*; make the master of Hollymead humble if not hospitable – a document such as has humbled the master of many another house, angering them at the same time. For it was a letter of request for a loan, signed and stamped with the King's seal.

Chapter Seven
A Young Lady not in Love

"I do believe it's Reginald Trevor."

Sabrina said this in rejoinder, now certain it was not the man she had climbed that hill in hopes of meeting.

"I'm sure of it," affirmed Vaga, in confident tone as before. "If I couldn't tell him, I can the horse – the light grey he always rides. And that's his dress – the colour at least. I don't think he has many changes, exquisite as he is, or we'd have seen some of them at Hollymead."

She made this remark with a smile of peculiar significance.

"Oh! yes; 'tis he," assented the sister, her eyes still upon him. "I'm sure now, myself. The horse – yes, the dress too. And, see! a red plume in his hat – that's enough. I wonder where he's bound for – surely not Hollymead!"

It was then the grave look already alluded to showed itself in her eyes. "Perhaps you can tell, sister?" she added, interrogatively.

"Sabrina! why do you say that? How should I be acquainted with Mr Trevor's movements or intentions – any more than yourself?"

"Ha – ha! What an artful little minx you are, Vag! A very mistress of deception!"

"You'll make me angry, Sab – I'm half that already."

"Without cause, then, or reason."

"Every reason."

"Name one."

"That you should suspect me of having a secret and keeping it from you."

"Goodness gracious! How just you are in your reproaches – you, who but this very moment have been accusing me of that selfsame thing! I, all candour, all frankness!"

Vaga was now flung back, as a sailor would say, on her "beam ends." For, in truth, she had made herself amenable to the charge.

"Oh! you innocent!" cried Sabrina, pressing her triumph. "Though you are three years younger than I, you're quite as old about some things, and this is *one* of them."

"This what?"

"This that; the thing, or man, if he may be so called, we see riding down yonder road."

"You wrong me, sister; I've no secret concerning him. I never cared for Rej Trevor in the way you appear to be hinting at – not three straws."

"Are you serious in what you say, Vag? Tell me the truth!"

There was an earnestness in the way the question was put – tone, air, everything – that bespoke more than a common interest about the answer.

It came, causing disappointment, with some slight vexation. For Vaga, thinking she had been badgered long enough, and, remembering, moreover, how very reticent the other had just shown herself, determined on having a *revanche*. It was altogether in consonance with her nature; though she had no idea of advantage beyond that of mere fun.

"Curiosity on the rack!" she triumphantly retorted. "What you've just been dooming me to! How does it feel, sister Sab!"

"Sister Sab" made no response; in turn being fairly conquered and cornered. But her silence and submissive look were more eloquent than any appeal she could have made. And, responding to them, her conqueror relentingly asked:

"Are you very, *very* desirous of knowing how the case stands between myself and Master Reginald Trevor?"

"I am, indeed. And when you've told me, I'll give you the reason."

"On that condition I'll tell you. He is nothing to me more than any other man. And when I add that no other man is anything either, you'll understand me."

"But, sister dear, do you mean to say you *love* no one?"

"I mean to say that – flat."

"And never have?"

"That's a queer question to be asked; above all by you, you who so often preach the virtue of constancy, crying it into my ears! If I ever had loved man, I think I should love him still. But as it chances, I don't quite comprehend what the sensation is; never having experienced it. And more, I don't wish to; that is, if it were to affect me as it seems to do you."

"What do you mean, Vaga?" asked the more sage sister, bristling up at the innuendo. "Love affect me! You're only fancying! Nothing of the sort, I assure you."

"Oh! yes; much of the sort; though you might not yourself perceive it. Everybody else does, at least I do – have for a very long time – ever since he went off to the wars."

"What he?"

"Again counterfeiting. And vainly. Well, I won't gratify you by giving his name this time. Enough to say that ever since you last saw him you haven't been like you used to be. Why, Sab, I can remember when you were as full of frolic as myself, or Hector here. Yet, for the last two years you've been as melancholy as a love-sick monkey. True, there's been a little brightening up in you of late – no doubt due to that letter. Ha – ha – ha!"

Sabrina laughed too, despite the unmerciful way she was being bantered. The allusion to "that letter" was not unpleasant. Its contents, very gratifying, had restored her heart's gladness and confidence. Not that she had ever doubted her lover's fealty, but only had fears for his life. She said nothing, however, leaving the other to rattle on.

"And now, Miss Prim-and-Prudery, I want your reason for prying into my secrets, after being so chary of your own; I demand it."

"Dear Vaga! you shall have it and welcome. After what you say, there need be no shyness in my telling you now. I was anxious about you on father's account, and my own, too, as your sister."

"Anxious about me! For what?"

"Your relations with yonder individual."

She nodded towards the horseman with the red feather in his hat.

"Very good of father and you to be so concerned about me; but don't you think I can take care of myself? I'm getting old enough to do that."

She was only a little over seventeen, but believed herself quite as much a woman as Sabrina, who was three years her senior. She had the proud, independent spirit of one, and brooked no control by her older sister; on the contrary, rather exercised it herself. She was her father's favourite; a circumstance that would appear strange to those acquainted with his character. Hence, in part, her assumption of superiority.

"Of course you can," returned Sabrina, assentingly. "And I'm glad of it."

"I suppose, then, it's owing to your and father's united solicitude on my behalf that Master Rej Trevor hasn't shown his face at Hollymead for the last couple of weeks."

"I've had nothing to do with it, Vaga."

"Which seems to say that somebody has, then. I suspected as much, by your having said nothing about it. As you seem to know something, Sab, you may as well tell it me."

"I will – all I know. Which is, that father has forbidden his visits to Hollymead. I only learnt it from our maid Gwenthian. It appears, that the last time Mr Trevor was at the house, she overheard a conversation between father and him; father telling him as much as that he would be no more welcome there."

"And what answer did the fine gentleman make? I suppose the eavesdropping Gwenthian heard that, too."

There was such evident absence of all emotion on the part of her who interrogated, she could not well be making believe. The other, seeing she was not, responded with confidence, —

"Nothing, or nothing much, except in mutterings, which the girl failed to catch the meaning of. But the nature may be imagined from the way he went off – all scowling and angry, she says."

"Gwenthian has never mentioned the circumstance to me; which I take it is a little strange on her part."

She thought it so, for of the two she was more a favourite with the waiting maid than her sister, and knew it. Between her and Gwenthian – a Forest girl of quick wit and subtle intelligence – many confidences had been exchanged. Therefore her wonder at this having been withheld.

"Not at all," rejoined Sabrina, entering upon a defence of Gwenthian's reticence. "There was nothing strange in her keeping it from you. She supposed it might vex you – told me so."

"Ha – ha – ha! How thoughtful of her! But it don't vex me – luckily, no – not the least bit; and Gwenthian should have known that, as you know now, Sab. Don't you?"

"I do," answered Sabrina, in full conviction. For Vaga's laugh was so utterly devoid of all regret at what had been revealed to her, no one could suppose or suspect there was within her breast a thought of Reginald Trevor, beyond looking on him in the light of a mere acquaintance. To prove this it needed neither her rejoinder, nor the emphasis she gave it, saying, —

"*I don't care that for him*!" the *that* being a snap of her fingers.

"I wish father had but known you didn't."

"Why?"

"Well, it might have saved him the scene Gwenthian was witness to; and which must have been rather painful to both. After all, it may have been for the best. But, worst or best, I wonder where Master Trevor is making for now? It can't be Hollymead."

"Not likely, after what you've told me. But we shall soon see – at least whether he be coming up this way."

Both were familiar with the Forest roads – had ridden if not walked them all – knew their every turning and crossing. Where that from Mitcheldean descended into the Drybrook valley it forked right and left at the ford of the little stream where now there is a bridge known as the "Nail." Left lay the road to Coleford, right, another leading back out of the Forest by the Lea Bailey. And between these two branchings a third serpentined up the slope for Ruardean, over the ridge on which they stood.

While they were still regarding the horseman on the grey, and his groom behind, two other horsemen came in sight, riding side by side on the same slope, just commencing its descent. Again Sabrina's eyes flashed up with delight – that must be her expected one – riding alongside his servant.

While indulging in this pleasant conjecture, she was surprised at seeing still another pair of mounted men, filing out from under the trees, side by side also, and following the first two at that distance and with the air which seemed to proclaim them servitors.

"It may not be he, after all!" she reflected within herself, her brow again shadowing over. "He said he would be alone with only Hubert, and – "

Her reflections were brought to an abrupt termination by seeing the grey horse, after plunging across the stream, turn head uphill in the direction of Ruardean.

There was no time to make further scrutiny of the *quartette* descending the opposite slope. In twenty minutes, or less if he meant speed, he on the grey would be up to them; and if Reginald Trevor, that would be awkward, whether on his way to Hollymead or not.

It was Sabrina who now counselled hastening home; which they did with a quick free step their country training and Forest practice had made easy, as familiar, to them.

Chapter Eight
A House in Tudor Style

It would be difficult to imagine a more enchanting spot for a dwelling-place than that where stood Hollymead House. Near the north-western angle of the Forest of Dean, it commanded a view of the Wye where this beautiful stream, after meandering through the verdant meads of Herefordshire, over old red sandstone, assaults the carboniferous rocks of Monmouth, whose bold, high ridges, lying transversely to its course, look as if no power of water could ever have cut through them. But the Wye has, in its flow of countless ages, carved out – in Spanish-American phrase *cañoned*– a channel with banks here and there rising nigh a thousand feet above the level of its bed. Between these it glides with swift current; not direct, but in snake-like contortions, fantastically doubling back upon itself, almost to touching. Here and there cliffs rise sheer up from the water's edge, grand mural escarpments of the mountain limestone, such as show the "tors" and dales of Derbyshire. The Codwell rocks below Lydbrook, forming the base of the famed "Symonds' Yat," are of this character, their grim façades seamed and broken into separate battlements, giving them resemblance to ruined castles, but such as could have been inhabited only "in those days when there were giants on the earth."

The view from Hollymead House – better still from a high hill or "tump" above it – took in the valley of the river where it enters the carboniferous *strata* near Kerne bridge. There was no Kerne bridge then; the stream being crossed by ford and ferry, a mile further up. Looking is that direction, in the foreground was Coppetwood Hill, an oblong eminence embraced by one of the great sinuosities of the river, more than six miles in the round and less than one across the neck or isthmus. At this neck, perched on a spur of the hill o'erhanging the stream, stood a vast pile of building, the castle of Goodrich, on whose donjon floated a flag long ere Norman baron set foot on the soil of England. For there the Saxon Duke Godric lorded it over his churls and swineherds; his iron rule at the Conquest replaced by that of the Marshalls, and later the Talbots, alike stern and severe.

Looking beyond, and north-westward, a wide stretch of country came under the eye, thickly wooded and undulating, the ancient kingdom of Erchyn – now called Archenfield – backed in the far distance by a horizon of hills, many with a mountain aspect, and some real mountains, as the curious Saddlebow, with a depression or "col" between its twin summits; Garway, the Cerriggalch, and the long dark range of the Hatterals.

To the west was a very conglomeration of mountains, seemingly crowded against one another, yet all apart, each distinguishable by an outline and aspect of its own. Most conspicuous of these, the conical Sugarloaf, the two Skyrrids – one of them named Holy Mountain – and the Blorenge, all towering above the town of Abergavenny, which is surrounded and embraced by them as the arena of an amphitheatre by its outer and more elevated circle.

Sweeping round the sky line, north and north-east the eye was met by many a bold projection, as the Longmynds and Clee hills, with their blue basalt, and the Haugh wood, summit of the famed Silurian upcast of Woolhope. Farther on to the east the Malvern Beacons of true mountain aspect, remarkable from their isolation, but still more in that there the geologist can see rocks the earliest stratified on earth, some metamorphosed, and all trace of stratification destroyed; while there, too, are visible the rocks of igneous agency, upheaved both by plutonic and volcanic forces – the gneisses, basalts, syenites, and granites.

Eastward over the Forest edge could be seen, extending far as vision's verge, the wide plains of Worcester and Gloucester – as said, an ancient sea bed – through which now flows the yellow Severn; and on a clear day bends and reaches of this grand river might be distinguished glistening, gold-like, in the sun; the level expanse of its valley diversified by several isolated and curious eminences – hills and ridges – as May and Breddon due east, and, more to the south, the Mendips and Cotswolds.

Alone looking southward from Hollymead no mountains met the eye; in that direction only the undulations of the Forest itself, clad in its livery of green – all trees. But immediately in front of the house, and sloping gently away from it, was a wide and long stretch of park-like pasture land, where the trees stood solitary or in clumps, a double row of grand oaks bisecting it centrally, guarding and shading the avenue which led to the public road outside. This passed from Ruardean out of the forest by a steep descent down to Walford, thence on to Ross.

Architecturally, Hollymead House was a singular structure. For it was in the early Tudor style, built when bricks were a scarce and dear commodity, and timber, in the inverse ratio, plentiful and cheap. The walls were a framework of hewn oak – uprights, cross-beams, and diagonal ties – due to the handiwork of the carpenter, only the spaces between showing the skill of the mason. And, as if to keep ever in record the fact of this double yet distinct workmanship, the painter and whitewasher had been now and then called upon to perpetuate it by giving separate and severely contrasting colours to what was timber and the interspacing material of mortar and brick. The result a striped and chequered aspect of the oddest and quaintest kind. Sir Richard might have had it in his mind when he made the figurative allusion to a cage and pair of pretty birds. Still it was not exactly cage-shaped, but more like several set together, some smaller ones stuck against or hanging from a large one that stood central; the congeries due to a variety of wings, projecting windows, dormers, and other outworks.

Equally odd and irregular the arrangement inside. An entrance-hall with a wide stairway carried up around it, the oak balusters very beams, with a profusion of carving on them; on each landing, corridors dimly lighted leading off to rooms no two on the same level; some of them bed-chambers, only to be got at by passing through other sleeping apartments interposed between. And, turn which way one would, along passages, or from room to room, short flights of stairs, or it might be but a step or two, were encountered everywhere, to the imminent risk of leg or neck-breaking.

Though such a structure may appear strange to the modern eye, it did not so then, for there was nothing uncommon in it Hollymead House was but one of many like mansions of the day, though one of the largest and most imposing. Nor are they all gone yet. Scores of such still stand throughout the shires of the marches, and in perfect repair, to commemorate the architectural skill, or rather the absence of it, which distinguished our ancestry in the Tudor times.

The owner of Hollymead, Ambrose Powell, was a man of peculiar tastes and idiosyncrasies, some evidence of which appears in the baptismal names he had bestowed upon his daughters. A fancy, having its origin in the fact that from a hill above the house could be seen the two great western rivers, Wye and Severn – poetically, *Vaga* and *Sabrina*– themselves in a sense sisters, nurslings from the same breast of far Plinlimmon. From the summit of that "tump" his elder daughter had looked on her name-mother at a later date than she made pretence of when urging the younger up the ridge between Ruardean and Drybrook. It was a wild, witching spot, the grey rocks of mountain limestone here and there peeping out from a low growth of hazel, hawthorn, yew, and holly. But the summit itself was bare, affording on all sides a varied and matchless panorama of landscape. Being within the boundaries of their own domain, Sabrina oft climbed up to it; not for the view's sake alone, but because it was to her hallowed ground, sacred as the place where she had made surrender of her young heart, when she told Sir Richard Walwyn it was his. There was a pretty little summer house, with seats, and many an hour Ambrose Powell himself spent there, in the study of books and the contemplation of Nature – his delight. Not in a mere meditative way, or as an idle dreamer; but an active observer of its workings and searcher after its secrets. Nor did he confine himself to this, but also took an interest in the affairs of man, so strong as to have studied them in every aspect – probed the social and political problems of human existence to their deepest depths. Which had conducted him to a belief – a full, firm conviction – in the superiority of republican institutions; as it must all whose minds are as God made or intended them, and not perverted by prejudice or corrupted by false teachings. He was, in point of fact, a Puritan, though not of the extreme stern sort; in his ways of thinking rather as Hampden and Sir Harry Vane, or with still closer similitude to a

people then scorned and persecuted beyond all others – the “Friends.” It is difficult in these modern days, under the light of superior knowledge, and a supposed better discrimination between right and wrong, to comprehend the cruelties, ay barbarous atrocities, to which were submitted the “Friends,” or, as commonly called, “Quakers.” A people who, despite their paucity of numbers, did then, and since then have done and been doing, more to ennoble the national character of England than all the apostles of her Episcopacy, with her political boasters and military braggarts to boot. If neither the most notorious nor glorious, no names in England’s history can compare in goodness and gracefulness with the Penns of 1640 and the Brights of 1880.

Though not a professed “Friend,” Ambrose Powell was a believer in their faith and doctrines; and in his daily walk and life acted very much in accordance with them. But not altogether. From one of their ideas he dissented – that of non-resistance. Of a proud, independent spirit, despite his gentle inclinings, he would brook no bullying; the last man to have one cheek smitten and meekly turn the other to the smiter. Instead, he would strike back. A scene we are now called upon to record, and which occurred on that same evening, gives appropriate illustration of this phase of his character.

Chapter Nine
A Right Royal Epistle

The girls had got home, hard breathing, panting, from the haste they had made. But though supper was announced as set, they did not think of sitting down to it, but instead, entered the withdrawing-room, a large apartment, with windows facing front. In the bay of one of these, their dresses unchanged and their hoods still on, they took stand, with eyes bent down the avenue, all visible from the window. At intervals along the road they had heard behind them the trampling of hoofs, and knew from what horses it proceeded. The sounds, at first faint and distant, had grown more distinct as they reached the park gate, and they had come up the avenue with a run, to the surprise and somewhat alarm of their father, who at the time was outside awaiting their return.

Already in wonder at their being so late, he would have inquired into the cause. But they anticipated him by at once telling him where they had been, what seen, and who, as they supposed, was advancing along the Ruardean road.

This last bit of intelligence seemed greatly to excite him; and while his daughters watched from the window, he himself was also keeping vigil in the porch outside. After hearing what they had to say, he had remained there, letting them pass in.

For a time the gaze of all was fixed on the park entrance, at the lower end of the long avenue, where a massive oak gate traversed between two piers of mason-work, old and ivy-mantled. Only for a short while were they kept in suspense. The flurried girls had barely got back their breath when a grey horse was seen, with head jam up against the gate, his rider bending down in the saddle to undo its fastenings.

In an instant after it was pushed open, and they saw Reginald Trevor come riding on towards the house, for they were now sure of its being he. He was yet at too great a distance for them to read the expression upon his face; but one near enough might have noted it as strange, without being able to interpret it. All the more because of its seeming to undergo constant and sudden changes; now as one advancing reluctantly to the performance of some disagreeable duty, wavering and seeming half-inclined to back out of it; anon, with resolution restored through some opposing impulse, as anger, this shown by the fire flashing in his eyes.

Never had he ridden up that avenue swayed by such feelings, or under the excitement of emotions so varied or vivid. Those he had hitherto felt while approaching Hollymead House were of a different nature. Confident always, or, if doubting, not enough to give him any great uneasiness. Vaga Powell resist him! She, a green country girl; he, a skilled, practised Lothario, conqueror in many a love combat! He could not think of failure. Nor would he have thought of it yet, believing the sole obstruction to his suit lay in the father. But now he had to face that father in a way likely to make his hostility more determined – turn it into very hate, if it was not so already.

In truth, a *rôle* of a very disagreeable kind was Reginald Trevor called upon to play; and more than once since entering on it he had felt like cursing Sir John Wintour in his heart – the King as well.

As he drew near to the house, and saw the two fair faces in the window – a little surprised seeing hoods over their heads at that hour – he more than ever realised the awkwardness of his errand. And, possibly, if at that last moment Vaga Powell had come forth, as oft before, to give him greeting, or even bestowed a smile from where she stood, he would have risked all, forgiven the insult he had received, and left his duty undone.

But no smile showed upon the girl's face, no glance gave him welcome; instead, he saw something like a frown, as never before. Only with a glimpse of that face was he favoured; Vaga, as he drew up in front, turning her back on him, and retiring into the shadowed obscurity of the room, whither her sister had preceded her.

It may have been only a seeming rudeness on their part, and unintentional. Whether or no, it once more roused his resentment against their father; who, still in the porch, received him with a countenance stern, as his own was vexed and angry.

There was a short interval of silence after the unexpected visitor had drawn up, still keeping to his saddle. He could not well dismount without receiving invitation; and that was not extended to him, much less word of welcome. Moreover his presence there, after what had passed, not only called for explanation, but by all the rules of politeness required his giving it before aught else should be said.

He did not, however; seeming embarrassed, and leaving the master of Hollymead no choice but to take the initiative. Which the latter at length did, saying sourly, and somewhat satirically —

"What may you be wanting with me, Mr Reginald Trevor? I take it your business is with *me*."

"With you it is," brusquely returned the other, still further nettled at the way he was addressed.

"Have the goodness then to tell me what it is. I suppose it's something that can be settled by you in the saddle. If not, you may alight and come indoors."

Speech aggravating, terribly insulting, as Ambrose Powell intended it should be. He had long ago taken the measure of the man, and wished to drive him to a distance, even further off than he had already done. His last words were enough, without the contemptuous look that accompanied them. But, stung by both, the emissary of Sir John Wintour stood proudly up in his stirrups, as he replied, with a touch of satire too, – "No need, sir, to enter your very hospitable house, or even get off my horse's back. My errand can be accomplished by delivering this at your door. But, as you chance to be in it, permit me to hand it direct to you."

While speaking he had drawn from under the breast of his doublet a folded sheet, a letter, on which was a large disc of red wax, stamped with the King's seal.

The master of Hollymead was not so impolite as to refuse taking the letter from his hands; and, as soon as in his own, he tore it open and read, —

"For Ambrose Powell, Gentn.

"Trustie and well-beloved, Wee greete you well. Having obserued in the Presidents and custome of former times that all the Kings and Queenes of the Realme, vpon extraordinary occasions, haue vsed either to resort to those Contributions, which arise from one generalitie of Subiects, or to the priuate helpes of some well affected in particular, by way of loane: In which latter course Wee being at this time inforced to proceed, for supply of some portions of Treasure for diuers publique seruices, and particularly for continuing and increasing our magazins in some large proportion in our Realme of Ireland, in our Nauie, and in our ffortes: in all which greater summes have been expended of late, both in building and repairing, and in making sundry prousions, than haue bene in twentie yeares before: We haue now in Our Eye an especiall care, that such discretion may be obserued in the choise of the lenders, and such an indifferent distribution, as the summes that Wee shall receiue may be raised with an equall Consideration of men's abilities: And therefore, seeing men haue had so good experience of Our repayment of all those summes which we haue euer required in this kinde, Wee doubt not but Wee shall now receiue the like Argument of good affection from you (amongst other of Our Subiects), and that with such alacrity and readiness as may make the same so much the more acceptable, especially seeing Wee require but that of some which few men would deny a friend, and haue a minde resolued to expose all our earthly fortune for the preseruation of the generall. The summe that Wee require of you by vertue of these presents is three thousand Pounds, Which we do promise in the name of Us, our heires and successors, to repay to you or your Assignes within eighteene monethes after the payment thereof vnto the Commissioner. The person that we have appointed to receiue it is our worthy servant, Sir Jno. Wintour, To whose hands Wee do require you to send it within twelue days after you have receiued this Priuy Seale, which, together with the Commissioner's acquittance, shall be sufficient Warrant unto the Officers of our receipt for the repayment thereof at the time limitted. – Giuen under our Priuy Seale at our Pallace of Westminster.

"Carolus Rex."

So ran the curious communication put into the hands of Ambrose Powell.

A letter of "Loan by Privy Seal" even more execrable both as to grammar and diction than the documents emanating from Royalty at the present day – and that is admitting much.

Spoke the master of Hollymead, after perusing it: —

"Request for a loan, the King calls this! Beggarly enough in the beginning – a very whine; but at the end more like the demand of a robber!"

"Mr Powell!" cried he who had presented it, his back now up in anger, "though but the messenger of Sir John Wintour, at the same time I'm in the service of the King. And, holding his Majesty's commission, I cannot allow such talk as yours. It's almost the same as calling the King a robber!"

"Take it as all the same, if you like, sirrah! And apply it also to Sir John Wintour, your more immediate master. Go back, and say to both how I've treated the begging petition – thus!"

And at the word he tore the paper into scraps, flinging them at his feet, as something to be trampled upon.

At this Reginald Trevor became furious; all the more from again seeing two feminine faces in the window above, by their looks both seeming to speak approval of what their father had said and done.

He might have given exhibition of his anger by some act of violence; but just then he saw something else which prompted to prudence, effectually restraining it. This something in the shape of three or four stalwart fellows – stablemen and servants of other sorts belonging to Hollymead House – who, having caught sound of the fracas in front, now appeared coming round from the rear.

No need for Reginald Trevor, noting the scowl upon their faces, to tell him they were foes, and as little to convince him of the small chance he and his varlet would have in an encounter with them. He neither thought of it nor any longer felt inclined to take vengeful action, not even to speaking some strong words of menace that had risen to his lips. Instead, choking them down, and swallowing his chagrin as he best could, he said, in a resigned, humble way, —

"Oh! well, Mr Powell; what you've done or intend doing is no affair of mine – specially. As you know, I'm here but in the performance of my duty, which I need not tell you is to me most disagreeable."

"*Very* disagreeable, no doubt!" rejoined the master of Hollymead, in a tone of cutting sarcasm; "and being so, the sooner you get through with it the better. I think you've made a finish of it now, unless you deem it part of this disagreeable duty to gather up those torn scraps of the King's letter, and carry them back to the Queen's obsequious servant, and your master, Sir John."

In the way of insult, taunt could scarce go farther. And he against whom it was hurled keenly felt it; at the same time felt his own impotence either to resent or reply to it. For the three or four fellows, with black brows, advancing from the rear, had been further reinforced, and now numbered nearly a dozen.

"I bid you good-evening, Mr Powell," said the emissary, as he turned his horse round, but too glad to get away from that unpleasant spot.

"Oh! good-evening, sir," returned the master of Hollymead, in a tone of mock politeness; after which he stood watching the ill-received visitor, till he saw him go out through the gates of his park.

Then over Ambrose Powell's face came a shadow – the shadow of a fear. For he knew he had offended a Royal tyrant, who, though now weaker than he had been through the restraint of a Parliament, might still have strength enough to tear him.

"My dear children," he said, as he joined them in the withdrawing-room, "the trouble I've been long anticipating has come at last. We will have to leave Hollymead, or I must fortify and defend it."

Chapter Ten
The Cousins

The sun had set as Reginald Trevor rode out of Hollymead Park. But he did not intend returning to Lydney that night; instead, purposed passing it in Ross, to which town he had also an errand. By making free use of the spur he might still reach his destination within the twilight.

Outside the park gate he was about turning in the Ross direction when he saw a party on horseback advancing from the opposite, as he had himself come. Four there were – two gentlemen in front, with their respective attendants a little behind. He could have shunned them by riding rapidly on before; but from the stylish appearance of one of the gentlemen he took it they were Cavaliers, possibly might be acquaintances; and after his long, lonely ride he was in the humour for company. It might help him some little to get over his chagrin. So he drew rein, and sate in his saddle waiting for them to come up.

There was a wide sweep of grass-grown turf between the park gate and the public road, and he had halted at the end of it on the right. Soon the party approaching reached the other, and he saw, with some surprise, and a little vexation, their horses' heads being turned in towards the gate. Whoever the gentlemen might be, they were evidently bent upon a visit to the house that had refused hospitality to himself.

With something more than curiosity he scanned them now. Were they known to him? Yes! one was; his surprise becoming astonishment, as in the more showily-attired of the two gentlemen he recognised his cousin Eustace.

"You, Eust!" he exclaimed, drawing his horse round, and trotting towards his kinsman; his glance given to the other being as that to a stranger; for he was not acquainted with Sir Richard Walwyn.

"You, Rej!" was the all-but echo of a response, and the cousins came together, Sir Richard passing on into the park. The gentleman tax-gatherer, still smarting under the rebuff given him, the smart shared by his servant, had ill-manneredly left the gate open behind them.

It was months since the cousins had met; though each knew where the other was, or ought to be. Hence Reginald's surprise to see Eustace there, supposing him to be engaged in his duties at Court. He spoke it inquiringly, as they held out to shake hands; but, before the other could make answer, he saw that which gave him a start – blood upon the hand extended to him! The white buckskin glove was reddened with it all over up to the gauntlets.

"God bless me, Eust! what's this? A wound! Have you been quarrelling?"

"Oh! nothing much. Only a little prick in the wrist."

"Prick in the wrist! But from what?"

"The point of a rapier."

"The deuce! Then you *have* been quarrelling. With whom, pray?"

"Speak a little lower, Rej. I'd rather *he* didn't hear us."

And Eustace nodded towards Sir Richard, who was not yet quite beyond earshot.

"Surely you don't mean the affair was with him?"

"I do – it was."

"He got the better of you?"

"Quick as you could count ten."

"Zounds! that's strange – you such a swordsman! But still stranger what I see now, your being in his company. Not his prisoner, are you?"

"Well, in a way I am."

"In that case, cousin, my sword's at your service. So let *me* try conclusions with him. Possibly, I may get you a *revanche*; at the same time release you from any *parole* you may be under."

Though, but the moment before, some little cowed, and declining a combat with serving men, Reginald Trevor was all courage now; and feared not to meet a gentleman in fair fight. For he saw that Trevor blood had been spilt, and, although he and his cousin Eustace had never been bosom friends, they were yet of the same family. The hot Cymric blood that ran in the veins of both boiled up in his to avenge whatever defeat his kinsman might have sustained, and without awaiting answer he asked impatiently, —

"Shall I follow, and flout him, Eust? I will if you but say the word."

"No, Rej; nothing of the sort. Thank you all the same."

"Well; if you're against it, I won't. But it edges a Trevor's teeth to see one of his kin – full cousin, too – worsted, conquered, dead – down as you seem to be. All, I suppose, from your antagonist being a bit bigger and older than you are. He's that as regards myself; for all I've no fear to face him."

"I know you haven't, Rej. But don't be angry with me for saying, if you did, it would end as it has with me – maybe worse."

The *ci-devant* gentleman-usher spoke with some pique. Notwithstanding the generous offer of his cousin to espouse his quarrel, there was that in the proposal itself which seemed to reflect on his own capability – a suggestion, almost an assertion, of patronising superiority.

"What do you mean, Eustace?" asked the other, looking a little roughed.

"That yonder gentleman," he nodded towards Sir Richard, now well out of hearing, "is a perfect master of both sword and horse. He proved himself *my* master in less than five minutes after engaging; could have thrust me in as many seconds had he been so disposed. While fighting with him I felt a very child in his hands; and he, as I now chance to know, was but playing with me. In the end he disarmed me – could have done it long before – by this touch in the wrist, which sent my rapier spinning off into the air. That isn't all. He has disarmed me in another sense; changed me from angry foe to, I might almost say, friend. That's why I've told you that I'm in a way his prisoner."

"It's a strange tale," rejoined Reginald, choking down his wrath. "All that, by sun, moon, and stars! But I won't question you further about it; only tell me why you are here. I thought you were so fixed in the Palace of Westminster, such a favourite of the grand lady who there rules the mart, you'd never more care to breathe a breath of country air. Yet here I find you in the Forest of Dean – its very heart – far away from court and city life as man could well get within England's realm. How has it come about, cousin?"

"I wouldn't mind telling you, Rej, if there was time. But there isn't. As you see, Sir Richard is waiting for me."

"Sir Richard who?"

"Walwyn."

"Oh, that's the name of your generous conqueror?"

"It is."

"I've heard of the individual, though never saw him till now. But how fell you into his company, and what brought about your quarrel?"

"Leave it, Rej, like other matters, till we meet again, and have more time to talk over such things."

"Agreed. Still there's time to say why you are going to Hollymead House."

"Hollymead House?"

"Oh, you didn't know that was the name of Ambrose Powell's place!"

"Ambrose Powell?"

"What! Nor yet the name of the man you're about to pay visit to?"

"I confess I do not."

"Nor anything else of him?"

"Nothing whatever."

He was on the point of adding, "Only that I've been told something about a pair of pretty girls," when it occurred to him he might be touching on a subject in which his cousin had a tender concern.

"'Pon my honour!" rejoined the latter, making an uphill attempt to laugh, "the tale grows stranger and stranger! You, of the King's Household, on your way to make acquaintance – friendly, of course – with one of his Majesty's greatest and most pronounced enemies – a man who hates King, Court, and Church; above all, bitter against your especial patroness, the Queen. I've heard him call her a Jezebel, with other opprobrious epithets."

"Odd in you, Rej, such a devoted Royalist, to have listened calmly to all that?"

"I didn't listen calmly; would have quickly stopped his seditious chattering, but for – "

"For what?" asked the other, seeing he hesitated.

"Oh, certain reasons I may some day make known to you. Like yourself, Eust, I have some secrets."

Eust thought he could give a good guess at one of them, but mercifully forbore allusion to it.

"But," he said, with an air of pretended surprise, "you've been just visiting this terrible king-hater yourself, Rej? If I mistake not, you came out of the park. You were up to the house, were you not?"

"I was."

"And has it shaken your loyalty, or in any way weakened it?"

"On the contrary, strengthened it. My errand to Ambrose Powell, with the reception he vouchsafed me – the ill-grained curmudgeon – has had all that effect."

"Then you've been quarrelling, too! Have you any objection to tell me what about?"

"Not the slightest. I was the bearer of a letter of Privy Seal to him – for a loan. Sir John Wintour, as you may be aware, has been appointed one of the King's Commissioners of Array for West Gloucestershire and the Forest. You know I'm in his service, which will make the matter understandable to you."

"And you haven't got the money? I needn't ask; there's the signs of refusal in your face."

"Got the money! Zounds! no. Instead, the recusant tore the letter into shreds, and flung them at his feet; defying me, Sir John, King, and all! Ah! well; that won't be the end of it. I shall be sure of having occasion to visit Hollymead again, and ere long! Next time the tables will be turned. But, cousin, after hearing what I've told you, are you still in the mind to go on to that seditious den? If you take my advice, you'll turn your back on Hollymead House, and come along with me. I'm making for Ross."

"To take your advice, Rej, would be to do as rude a thing as a man well could – ruder than I ever did in my life. Disloyal, too – doubly so; I should be traitor to gratitude, as to courtesy. Indeed, I've trenched scandalously on good manners now, by keeping yonder gentleman so long waiting for me."

He nodded towards Sir Richard, who had halted at some distance up the avenue.

"Oh, very well," sneeringly rejoined Sir John Wintour's emissary. "Of course, you can do as you like, Eust. I'm not your master, though yonder gentleman, as you call him, seems to be. Good-evening!"

And with this curt leave-taking, the sneer still on his face, he dug the spurs deep into his horse's ribs, and went off at a gallop along the road for Ross.

Chapter Eleven
Three Curious Characters

"Yee-up, Jinkum! Yee-up!"

The exclamations were accompanied by the thwack of a stick over the hips of a donkey half-hidden under a pair of panniers.

"Don't press the poor creetur, Jack. It be a hardish climb up the pitch. Gie't its time."

"But you know, Winny, the panners be most nigh empty – more's the pity."

"True o' that. But consider how fur's been the day. Seven mile to Monnerth – a good full load goin' – an' same back, whens we be home. An't han't had thing to eat, 'cept the pickin's 'long the roadside."

"All the more reezun for gittin' 'im soon home. I'd lay wager, if the anymal kud speak, 't 'ud say the same."

"Might. But, for all that, him's rightdown tired. If him want, there wud be no need yer slappin' he. Don't slap him any more, Jack."

"Well, I won't. Yee-up, Jinkum! I 'ant a-goin' to gi' ye the stick agen. 'Nother mile, and ye'll be back to yer own bit o' paster in the ole orchart, whar the grass'll be up to yer ears. Yee-up!"

At which Jinkum, as though comprehending the merciful disposition towards him, and grateful for it, seemed to improve his pace.

The speakers were a man and woman, both of uncommon appearance – the man a diminutive specimen of humanity, who walked with a jerking gait, due to his having a wooden leg. The woman was taller than he, by the head and shoulders quite; while in every other way above the usual dimensions of her sex. Of a somewhat masculine aspect, she was withal far from ill-favoured – rather the contrary. Her gown of coarse homespun, dust-stained and *délabré*, could not conceal a voluptuous outline of figure; while to have her eyes and hair many a queen would have been glad to give the costliest jewel in her crown. The complexion was dark, the features of a gipsy type – though she was not one – the hair, a very hatful, carelessly coiled around her head, black as the wing of a crow. The first thought of one beholding her would be: "What a woman, if but washed and becomingly clad?" For both skin and dress showed something more than the dust that day caught up from the road – smouches of older date. Despite all, she was a grand, imposing personage; of tireless strength, too, as evinced by her easy, elastic step while breasting that steep pitch on her twenty-second mile since morning. The journey seemed to have had little effect on her, however it may have jaded Jinkum.

Notwithstanding the disparity in size between the man and woman – a good deal also in their age, he being much her senior – they bore a certain resemblance to one another. It lay in their features and complexion; Jack having a gipsyish look, too. Nor any wonder at their being some little alike, since they were *not* man and wife, but brother and sister – both born Foresters. There was nothing in the character of either at all disreputable, though their business was such as usually brings suspicion on those who follow it. Known all over the forest, and for miles around it, as cadgers, they trafficked in every conceivable thing by which an honest penny might be made, though their speciality was the transport of fowls, with other products of the farmyard, to the markets of Ross and Monmouth – generally on freight account – taking back such parcels as they could pick up. Ruardean was their port of departure and return; their home, when they were at home, being a cottage in the outskirts of that elevated village.

Rarely, if ever, were "Jerky Jack" – the soubriquet his gait had gained for him – and his big sister seen apart; Winny, or Winifred – for such was her baptismal name – being a valuable helpmate to him. Some said she was more – his master.

That day they had been to Monmouth market, and now, at a late hour of the evening – after sunset – they were climbing Cat's Hill on their return homeward. As already said, there was then no Kerne bridge, and they had crossed by the ferry at Goodrich; a roundabout way to where they now were, but unavoidable – making good the woman's estimate of the distance.

Up the remainder of the pitch, Jerky kept his word, and no more stick was administered to Jinkum. But before reaching the summit the tired animal was treated to a spell of rest, for which it might thank a man there met, or rather one who dropped upon them as from the clouds. For he had come slithering down a steep shelving bank that bordered the road, suddenly presenting himself to their view outside the selvage of bushes.

Notwithstanding his *impromptu* appearance, neither showed sign of alarm nor surprise. Evidently they expected him; for but the minute before a sound resembling the call of the green woodpecker – the "heekul," as known to them – had reached their ears, causing them to turn their eyes toward the direction whence it came. From the wood, where, of course, they could see nothing; but there was a peculiarity in the intonation of the sound, telling them it proceeded not from the throat of a bird, but was in some way made by a man. That the woman knew how, and who the man, she gave evidence by saying, "That be Rob!" as she spoke a pleased expression coming over her countenance.

Whether Rob or no, he who so mysteriously and fantastically presented himself to their notice was a man of aspect remarkable as either of them. In size a Colossus; dark-complexioned like themselves, with full beard, and thick shock of brown-black hair standing out around his neck in curls and tangles. His coat of bottle-green cloth – amply skirted – and red plush waistcoat, showed creased and frowsy, as if he had passed the previous night, and many preceding it, in a shed or under a tree. For all, there was something majestic in his mien, just as with the woman – a savage grandeur independent of garb, which could assert itself under a drapery of rags.

As the three came together, he was the first to speak, more particularly addressing himself to Jerky. For the sister had a little side business to transact, plunging her hand into one of the panniers, and bringing forth a basket, out of which the neck of a bottle protruded.

"Well, Jack! What's the news down Monnerth way?" was the commencement of the colloquy.

"Lots, Rob; 'nough if they were wrote out on paper to fill them panners, an' load the donkey down."

Jinkum's owner was of a humorous turn, and dealt in figures of speech, often odd and varied as his bills of lading.

"Tell us some o' 'em," requested Rob, placing himself in an attitude to listen.

"Well," proceeded the cadger, "it be most all 'bout politicks there now, wi' rumours o' war, they say be a brewin'. The market war full o' them rough 'uns from Raglan side, Lord Worster's people, bullyin' everybody an' threetenin' all as wudn't cry out for the King."

"Ay;" here interposed the big sister, with a sneer, "an' you cried it, Jack – shouted till I was afeerd you'd split yer windpipe. That ye did!"

"And if I did," rejoined Jack, excusing himself, "how war I to help it? If I hadn't they'd a throttled me; may-be pulled off my wooden leg, and smashed my skull wi't. An' ye know that, Winny. A man who'd a said word there favour o' the Parlyment wud a stud good chance o' gettin' tore limb fro' limb. Tho' I han't two for 'em to tear sunderwise, I wasn't the fool to go buttin my head 'gainst a wall when no good could come o't. If I did cry 'Long live the King!' I thinked the contrary, as Rob knows I do."

"That do I, Jack, right well. A true free-born Forester, as myself, I know you ha' no leanin' like as them o' Monnerth and Lydney; Royalists an' Papists, who want to make slaves o' us, both body and soul, an' keep us toilin' for them an' their fine-dressed favourites – devil burn 'em!"

Having thus delivered himself, the free-born Forester dropped conversation with Jerky, confining it to the sister. For which Jack gave them an opportunity, shrewdly guessing it was desired.

Once more saluting Jinkum with a “yee-up!” he started the animal off again up the hill, himself stumping briskly after.

Chapter Twelve
A Combat in a Quarry

The man and woman left behind, as they stood *vis-à-vis*, presented a striking appearance. Such a pair in juxtaposition were a sight not often given to the eye. He some inches the taller – though well matched as regarded the distinction of the sexes; but both of towering stature, with air so commanding that one, who could have seen them there and then, would not have given a thought to the coarseness of their apparel, or, if so, instantly forgetting it. Looking at their faces, in their eyes as they met in mutual gaze, he would have noticed something of a nature to interest more than any quality or fashion of dress – the light of love. For they loved one another warmly, and, perhaps, as purely and tenderly, as if their hearts had been beating under robes of silk.

No words of love passed between them now. If they intended speaking such, they held them in reserve till matters more pressing should be disposed of.

Upon these the man entered at once, asking, —

"Heerd you anythin' 'bout me, Win?"

"Yes, Rob."

"What?"

"They have been wonderin' how ye managed to get out o't gaol, an' blame Will Morgan for lendin' ye a hand. Day afore yesterday a party came over from Lydney wi' that young officer as be wi' Sir John Winter – Trevor I think they call him."

"Yes; that's the name. I know him well enough – too well. 'Twas he as took me in the High Meadows."

"Oh! it was. Well; he hev taked Will, too, an' carried him away to Lydney, where Sir John ha' now got a gaol o' his own. There wor some trouble 'bout it; the Lord Herbert, who's governor at Monnerth, claimin' him as his prisoner. But the other sayed as yours wor a case o' deer-stealin' in the Forest, an' Will had helped, ye ought both be taken before Sir John an' tried by him, he bein' head man o' it. Then Lord Herbert gave in, an' let them take him off. Will did help ye a bit, didn't he?"

"More'n a bit. But for him, liker than not, I'd now be in theer lock-up at Lydney. Well, if he be goed there he mayn't ha' so long to stay as they think for – won't, if what I've heerd be true."

"What's ye heerd, Rob?"

"Some news as ha' just come down from Lunnun. It's sayed the King's been chased out o't, an' the Parlyment be now havin' it all theer own way. Supposin' that's the case, Sir John Winter won't hae it all his own way much longer. We Foresters'll deal wi' him diff'rent from what we've been a doin'. An' 'bout that I ha' got word o' somethin' else."

"What somethin'?"

"A man, they say's comin' down here – from Lunnun too. One o' the right sort – friend o' the people. Besides, a soldier as ha' seen foreign service, an' is reckoned 'mong the best and kindest of men."

"I think I know who ye mean, Rob. Ain't it Sir Richard Walwyn?"

"That's the man."

"He wor at Hollymead fore he went away to the wars. I've seed him many's the time. He used to often ride past our place, an' always stopped to ha' a word an' a joke wi' Jack. That makes me remember him; an' if I beant mistook somebody else ha' remembrance o' him in a different way, an' ain't like ever to forget him."

"Who?"

"One o' the young ladies o' Hollymead – the older 'un, Miss Sabrina. I ha' heerd as much from the house sarvints theer."

Just the shadow of a cloud had shown itself on Rob's brow as Win commenced giving her reminiscences of the knight who had been visitor at Hollymead and used to crack jokes with Jerky. It passed off, however, ere her relation came to an end.

"Well, dear Win," he said, speaking more tenderly from consciousness of having harboured an unjust suspicion; "they say Sir Richard be comin' down to raise soldiers for the Parlyment. If that be so, one o' the first to join him'll be Rob Wilde; an' maybe the biggest, if not best, in the fightin' line."

"You'll be the best, Rob; I know you will. Who could equal you?"

At which she threw open her arms, then closed them around his neck, covering him with kisses.

In all probability, many soft words and much tender concourse would have succeeded this outburst of admiration. But the opportunity was not allowed them. Just then they heard a clattering of hoofs, horsemen coming down the road from Ruardean, at a gallop.

Rob, setting his ears to listen, could tell there were two of them, but nothing more – nothing to admonish him whether they were friends or enemies. But with the consciousness of having stolen deer and broken jail, twenty to one on their being the latter, reflected he. In any case prudence counselled him hiding himself, and letting the horsemen pass on.

His first impulse was to spring back up the bank, leaving the woman in the road. They could have nothing against her, whoever they were. But they were near now, still riding rapidly, and before he could scramble to the summit of the slope would be sure to see him. Just then, a hiding-place handier, and more easily accessible, came under his eye; a break in the bank just opposite, which he knew to be the entrance to an old limestone quarry, long abandoned. He would be safe enough in there, at least from observation by any one passing down the road. Whether or no, it was now Hobson's choice with him; the trampling was louder and clearer; and but for an abrupt bend of the road above he could have seen the horsemen, as they him. No alternative, therefore, but to cut into the quarry; which he did – the woman with him.

Scarce were they well inside it, when the hoof-strokes ceased to be heard. The horses had been suddenly pulled up; a colloquy ensuing.

"Hullo, Jerky!" it begun. "On your way from Monmouth market, I suppose?"

"Yes, yer honour; jist that."

"But where's your big sister? I've met you scores of times along the roads, though never without her. I hope there's nothing amiss?"

"Oh! nothin', sir. She be wi' me now, close by, coming up the pitch, only ha' legged a bit behint."

"Well, Jack, I won't detain you; as I must not be lagging myself. I want to reach Ross before the night's on. Good-bye, old cadge!"

At which the dialogue came to an end, and the hoof-strokes were again heard, now coming close.

Only for a minute or so, when a second colloquy was entered upon, this time one of the voices being different.

Rob Wilde knew them both; had long ago recognised the one that held speech with the cadger, and had reason to feel keenly apprehensive as he listened. Far more now, as the words of the later dialogue dropped upon his ears.

"Old Timber-toes said his sister was just behind. I don't see anything of her; and certainly she's not one there should be any difficulty in making out – even at a league's distance. Hey! what the deuce is that?"

And Reginald Trevor again reined up. For it was he, with his servant.

"A basket, it appears to be, Captain," answered the man, "with a bottle in it. Yes," he added, after drawing closer, lifting it from the ledge, and peering into it. "Something besides the bottle – bread, cheese, and bacon."

"Where there's so much smoke there should be some fire," reflected his master, who had halted in the middle of the road. Then, thinking it odd he saw nothing of the cadger's sister, and noticing

the gap leading into the quarry, it occurred to him she might be there. Partly out of curiosity, and partly from an intuition, which the basket of provisions had done something to inspire, he headed his horse at the opening and rode in.

Soon as inside, an exclamation rose to his lips, in tone which told of more than surprise. There was triumph, exultation, in it. For there saw he, not only the woman missing from the road, but a man, the same who had been for some time missing from Monmouth Gaol. The bushes in the old quarry were not thick enough, nor tall enough, to give either of them concealment; and they were standing erect, without further attempt at seeking it.

"Ho – ho! my giant," cried the officer. "It's here you are; making love to Jerky's sister. And a pretty pair of love-birds too! Ha! ha! That explains the basket of eatables and drinkables. What a pity to interrupt your billing and cooing! But I must. So master Rob, deer-stealer and jail-breaker," he added drawing his sword. "Come along with me! You needn't trouble about bringing the basket. In the Lydney lock-up I'll see to your being fed free of expense."

"When you get me there," rejoined Rob, in defiant tone, as he spoke pulling from under the breast of his doublet a long-bladed knife, and setting himself firm for defence.

This was unexpected by the King's officer, who had not thought or dreamt of resistance. It was there, however, in sure, stern shape, and he felt himself committed to overcoming it. With a prick of his spur he sprang his horse forward, and straight at Rob, as though he would ride over him, his sword held ready for either cut or thrust.

But neither gave he, nor could. As the horse's head came close to him, the Colossus lunged out with long arm, and sent the point of his knife into the animal's nostrils, which caused it to rear up and round, squealing with pain. This brought its rider's back towards the man who had pricked it; and before he could wheel again, Reginald Trevor was in the embrace of him he had jokingly called giant – realising that he had the strength of one, as he was himself dragged out of his saddle.

But they were not the only combatants in the quarry. For, following his master, the servant had made to assist him in his assault against the big man, taking no note of the big woman, or fancying she would not interfere. In which fancy he was sadly mistaken. For in scrimmage his back becoming turned upon her, as if taking pattern by Rob, she sprang up, caught hold of the lightweight groom, and jerked him to the ground, easily as she would have pulled a bantam cock from out one of the Jinkum's panniers.

In less than threescore seconds after the affair began, Reginald Trevor and his attendant were unhorsed, disarmed, and held as in the hug of a couple of bears.

"I'll let ye go," said Rob to his prisoner, after some rough handling, "when ye say you won't take advantage o' my gen'rosity by renewin' the attack. Bah!" he added, without waiting for response, "I'll put that out o' yer power."

Saying which, he caught up the officer's sword, and broke it across his knee, at the same time releasing him. The blade of the attendant was treated likewise, and both master and man were permitted to rise to their feet, feeling vanquished as weaponless.

"You can take yourselves off," sneeringly said the deer-stealer; "an' as ye talked 'bout bein' in Ross 'fore nightfall, you'll do well to make quick time."

Not a word spoke Reginald Trevor in reply, nor thanks for the mercy shown him. Too angry was he for that; his anger holding him speechless because of its very impotence. In sullen silence he regained the bridle of his horse – like himself having lost spirit by copious bleeding of the nose – climbed back into the saddle, and continued on down Cat's Hill, his varlet behind him, both swordless, and yet more crestfallen than when they rode out through the gate of Hollymead Park.

"We're in for it now, Win," said Rob, to the cadger's sister, after seeing them depart. "An' we've got to look out for danger. I'm sorry 'bout you havin' to share it; but maybe 'twon't be so much, after all. Once Sir Richard gets here, an' the fightin' begins, as it surely must soon, trust me for takin' care o' ye."

"I will – I do, Rob!"

And again the great arms were thrown around his neck, while upon his lips were showered a very avalanche of kisses.

Chapter Thirteen
Looking Forward to a Fight

Some truth was there in the report that had reached Rob Wilde, of the King being chased out of London. Though not literally chased, after his display in the House of Commons, ludicrous as unconstitutional, he found the metropolis too hot for him. Moreover, there was a whisper about impeaching the Queen; and this arch *intrigante*, notwithstanding her high notions of Royal right, was now in a fit of Royal trembles. Strafford had lost his head, Laud was in prison, likely to lose his; how knew she but that those bloodthirsty islanders might bring her own under the axe? They had done as much for a Queen more beautiful than she. Mobs daily paraded the streets, passing the Palace; the cry, "No bishops!" came in through its windows, and Charles trembled as he thought of his father's significant epigram, "No bishop, no king." So out of Whitehall they slipped – first to Windsor to pack up; the Queen, in fine, clearing out of the country, by Dover, to Holland.

It was a backstairs "skedaddle" with her; carrying off as much plunder as she could in the scramble – chests of jewels of unknown but fabulous value, as that represented as having been found in the isle of Monte Cristo. Enough, at all events, to hold Court abroad; maintain regal surroundings; even raise an army for the reconquest and re-enslavement of the people she had plundered.

It is unpleasant to reflect on such things, far more having to speak of them. Sad to think that though England is two centuries and a half older since Charles Stuart and Henrietta de Medici did all in their power to outrage her people and rob them of their rights, this same people is to-day not a wit the wiser. The late Liberal victory, as it is called, may be urged as contradicting this allegation; but against that is to be set the behaviour of England's people, as represented by their Parliament for the last six years, sanctioning and endorsing deeds that have brought a blight on the nation's name, and a cloud over its character, it will take centuries to clear off. And against that, too, the spirit which seems likely will pervade in this new Legislative Assembly, and the action it will take. When the Long Parliament commenced its sittings, the patriots composing it never dreamt of letting crime go unpunished. Instead, their first thoughts and acts were to bring the betrayers of their country to account. "Off with his head – so much for Strafford!"

"To the Tower with Laud and the twelve recalcitrant bishops!"

"Clear out the Star Chamber and High Commission Court!" "Abolish monopolies, Loans of Privy Seal, Ship-tax, Coal and Conduit money, with the other iniquitous imposts!" And, *presto*! all this was done as by the wand of a magician, though it was the good genius then guiding the destinies of England. Off went Strafford's head; to the Tower was taken Laud; and the infamous royal edicts of a decade preceding were swept from the statute-book, as by a wet sponge passed over the score of a tapster's slate.

What do we see now? What hear? A new Parliament entering on power under circumstances so like those that ushered in the "Long" as to seem almost the same. And a Ministry gone out who have outraged the nation as much as did the Straffords, Digbys, and Lauds. But how different the action taken towards them! No Bill of Attainder talked of, no word of impeachment, not even a whisper about voting want of confidence. Instead of being sent to a prison, as the culprits of 1640, they of 1880 walk out of office and away, with a free, jaunty step and air of bold effrontery, blazoned with decorations and brand new titles bestowed on them – a very shower, as the sparks from a Catherine wheel!

Verily was the lot of Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford, laid in unlucky times. Had he lived in these days, so far from losing his head, it would have been surmounted by a ducal coronet. And Laud, already at the top of the ecclesiastical tree, with no possibility of hoisting him to higher earthly honours, would have had heavenly ones bestowed on him by being enrolled among the saints.

Though merely writing a romance, who will say that in this matter I am romancing? The man that does must be what Sir Richard Walwyn pronounced him who is not a Republican; and back to Sir Richard's *dictum* I refer him.

Soon as Charles had got his Queen safe out of harm's way, he betook himself to York, there to enter upon more energetic action. For there he felt safer himself, surrounded by a host of hot partisans. In political sentiment, what a curious reversion has taken place since then between the capitals of the North and South – almost an exchange! Then York was all Royalist, and as a consequence filled with the foes of Liberty; London full of its friends. Now the former has mounted to the very hill-top of Liberal aspiration; the latter sunk into the slough of a shameful retrogression!

But the thing is easily explained. Those who dwell in the kingdom's capital are nearer to the source of contamination. There Bung and Beadledom, with their vested rights, hold sway; there the scribblers who wear plush find encouragement and promotion; while the corrupting influence of modern finance has nursed into life and strength a swarm of gamblers in stocks, promoters of bubble companies, tricksters in trade, and music-hall cads – a sorry replacement of the honest mercers and trusty apprentices of the Parliamentary times.

Once separated from his Parliament, the King had an instinct that all friendly intercourse between it and himself would soon be at an end; this nursed into conviction by the Hertfords, Digbys, and other like "chicks" who formed his *entourage*. Active became he now in adopting precautions, and taking measures to sustain himself in the struggle that was imminent. And now more industrious than ever in the way of money raising; anew granting monopolies, and sending letters of Privy Seal all over the land, wherever there seemed a chance of enforcing their demands – for demands were they, as we have seen. To Sir John Wintour had been entrusted some scores of these precious epistles, with authority to deliver them, collect the proceeds, and send them on to replenish the royal exchequer; and it was one such Reginald Trevor saw torn into scraps on the porch of Hollymead House.

This same Sir John was what Scotchmen would call a "canny chiel." Courtier, and private secretary to the Queen, he had come in for a goodly share of pilferings from the public purse; among other jobs having been endowed with the stewardship of the Forest of Dean, with all its privileges and perquisites. Appointed one of the Commissioners of Array for West Gloucestershire, he had built him a large mansion in the neighbourhood of Lydney – the White House as called – though it is not there now, he with his own hand having afterwards set the torch to it. But then, on the clearing out of the Court from London, Sir John had cleared out too, going to his country residence by Severn's side, which he at once set about placing in a state of defence. None more clearly than he foresaw the coming storm.

It seemed to him near now when Reginald Trevor returned to the White House and reported his reception at Hollymead, with the defiant message to himself and his King. But Sir John was not a man of hot passions or hasty resolves. Long experience as a courtier had taught him to subdue his temper, or, at all events, the exhibition of it. So, instead of bursting forth into a furious display, he quietly observed, —

"Don't trouble yourself, Captain Trevor, about what Ambrose Powell has said or done. It won't help his case any. But," he added reflectingly, "there seems no particular call for haste in this business. Besides, I'm expecting an addition to the strength of our little garrison. To-morrow, or it may be the day after, we shall have with us a man, if I mistake not, known to you."

"Who, Sir John?"

"Colonel Thomas Lunsford."

"Oh! certainly; I know Lunsford well. He was my superior officer in the northern expedition."

"Ah! yes; now I remember. Well; I have word of his being *en route* hither with some stanch followers. When he has reported himself, allowing a day or two for rest, we'll beat up the quarters of this recusant, and make him repent his seditious speech. As for the money, he shall pay that, every

pound, or I'll squeeze it out of him, if there's stock on the Hollymead estate, or chattels in his house worth so much."

There was something in the "recusant's" house Reginald Trevor thought worth far more – one of the recusant's daughters. Of that, however, he made no mention. To speak of it lay not in the line of his duties; and even thinking of it was now not near so sweet as it had been hitherto. Little as he liked Colonel Lunsford, he would that night have been glad of him for a boon companion – in the bowl to help drown the bitter remembrance of his adventures of the preceding day.

Chapter Fourteen
A Hawking Party

"Hooha-ha-ha-ha!"

The cry of the falconer, followed by a whistle, as the hawks were unleashed and cast-off.

Away went they, jesses trailing, and bells tinkling, in buoyant upward flight. For the heron that had risen out of the sedge, intending retreat to its heronry, at sight of the enemy after it, suddenly changed direction, and was now making for upper air with all its might of wing.

The hawks were a *cast* of "peregrines" of the best strain. In perfect training, it needed no repetition of the *hooha-ha-ha-ha* to encourage them; for, as soon as their hoods were off, they had sighted the enemy, and shot like arrows after it.

At first their flight was direct – a *raking off*– but in drawing nearer the doomed bird it changed to gyrations as they essayed to mount above it. The heron, in a phrenzy of fright, uttered its harsh "craigh," disgorged the contents of its crop, with a view of lightening itself, and made a fresh effort to escape skyward. In vain! The falcons, with quicker stroke of wing, notwithstanding their spiral course, were soon seen soaring over it. Then the foremost – for one was ahead – having gained the proper height, with spread "train," and quivering "sails," poised herself for the "*stoop*." Only a second; then down swooped she at the quarry, "arm" outstretched and "pounces" set for *raking* it.

The attempt was unsuccessful. Rarely is heron touched at the first stoop. Unwieldy, and sluggish of flight as the creature may appear, it has a wonderful capacity for quickly turning, and can long elude hawk or falcon, if there be but one. When doubly assailed, however, by a *cast*, of trained peregrines, it is at a disadvantage, not having time to recover itself from the stoop of the one till the other is upon it.

So was it with this. In an instant after, the second shot down upon it with a squeal, the heron again giving out its "craigh," and then the two, hawk and heron, were seen clinging together. For this time the bird of prey had not attempted to *rake* but *bind*; and bound were they, the pounces of the falcon stuck fast in the flesh of its victim. Then followed a convulsive flapping of wings, the two pairs beating against one another, soon to be joined by a third; for, meanwhile, the first falcon having soared up again, once more poised herself and stooped, she also binding to the common quarry.

The aerial chase was now at an end, but not the combat. Unequal as this was, the heron still lived; and, when the three should come to earth, might impale either or both its adversaries on that long lance-like beak it but unskilfully wields in the air. To prevent this, the falconer hurried off for the spot towards which they were descending. Slowly they came down, upheld by the united fluttering of their wings, but reached the ground at length, luckily not far off. And when the falconer got up he gave out a loud "whoop," signal of the quarry killed. For he saw that the heron was dead, and the peregrines had already commenced depluming it.

Other voices joined in the *paean* of triumph; one of sweet, silver tones, accompanied by the clapping of a pair of pretty hands. They were the same voice and hands that on the top of Ruardean Hill had hounded on the dog Hector in his half-playful demonstration against the donkey.

"I knew my pair of 'Pers' would do it in good style!" cried Vaga in exultation, for she was the owner of the peregrines. "Did any of you ever see a kill quicker than that?"

The interrogatory was put to a trio of individuals beside her, on horseback as herself – one of them her sister, the other two Sir Richard Walwyn and Eustace Trevor. There was an *entourage* of attendants, the falconer with his helps, mounted grooms, and dogs quartering the sedge – in short, a complete hawking party from Hollymead House. For, notwithstanding his gentle inclinings, Ambrose Powell was no foe to field sports – rather favoured them when not unnecessarily cruel; and, though rarely indulging in them himself, put no restraint on his daughters' doing so. The younger

was passionately fond of hawking, and the elder also relished it in a more sober way – it being then regarded as a proper pastime for ladies.

The hawking party, whose incidents we are chronicling, came off some ten days after the arrival of Sir Richard Walwyn and Eustace at Hollymead; the scene being a strip of marsh with a stream filtering through it, here and there a pool where the moor-hen coquettishly flirted her tail – a favourite haunt of the heron, as of teals, widgeons, and wild ducks. That the knight was still sojourning at Hollymead House need be no matter of surprise; but why the son of Sir William Trevor had not long ere this reported himself under the parental roof, by Abergavenny, may seem a very puzzle. Its explanation must await the record of after events; though; an incident occurring there and then, with speech that accompanied, may throw some light upon it.

Vaga's question was rather in the way of an exclamation, to which she did not expect reply. Neither waited for it; but giving the whip to her palfrey trotted off to where the falconer was engaged in releasing the dead heron from the pounces of the hawks. She went not alone, however; Eustace Trevor having pricked his animal with the spur, and started after, soon overtaking her. The other pair stayed behind as they were.

A hundred yards or so round the edge of the marsh, and the two who had ridden off came to a halt. For, by this, the falconer having rehooded the hawks, and retrieved the quarry, met them, heron in hand, holding it out to his mistress; as would one, first up at the death of a fox, present Reynard's brush to some dashing Diana of the field.

A splendid bird it was; the white heron or great egret, a rare species, even then, though not so rate as now.

"Give it to the pers, Van Dorn!" she directed, after a short survey of it; despite its rarity, showing less interest in it than under other circumstances she might have done. "Unhood again, and let them have it. We forgot to bring the doves for them, and they deserve reward for the way they both *bound* it – so cleverly."

Van Dorn, a Hollander from Falconswaerd – whence in those days all falconers came – bowing, proceeded to execute the command, by removing their hoods from the hawks.

"Before he surrenders it to their tender mercies, may I ask a favour?"

It was Eustace Trevor who interrogated, addressing himself to the young lady.

"Of course you may. What is it, sir?"

"Leave to appropriate a few of the heron's feathers."

"Why, certainly! The falconer will pluck them for you. Van Dorn, pull out some of its feathers, and hand them to this gentleman. I suppose you mean those over the train, Mr Trevor?"

"Yes, they."

"You hear, Van Dorn."

Without that the man knew what was wanted; the loose tail coverts so much prized for plumes; and, drawing them out one by one, he bound them into a bunch with a piece of cord whipped round their shanks; then handed them up to the cavalier. After which he went off to attend upon his hawks.

There was a short interregnum of silence as the falconer turned his back on them, and till he was out of earshot. Then the young lady asked, with apparent artlessness, —

"But, Mr Trevor, what do you intend doing with the heron's feathers?"

"Pluming my hat with them."

"Why, it's plumed already! and by far showier ones!"

"Showier they may be; but not prettier, nor so becoming. And certainly not to be esteemed as these; which I shall wear as souvenir of a pleasant time – the pleasantest of my life."

There was a pleased expression in her eyes as she listened to what he said; still more when she saw what he did. This, to whip the hat from his head, pluck the *panache* of ostrich feathers from its *aigrette* and insert those of the heron in their place. Something he did further seemed also to give her

gratification, though she artfully concealed it. Reproach on her lips, but delight in her heart, as she saw him tear the displaced plume into shreds, and toss them to the ground at his horse's feet.

"How wasteful you are, Mr Trevor?" she exclaimed, reprovingly. "Those foreign feathers must have cost a great deal of money. What's worse, you've spoiled the look of your hat! Besides, you forget that those now on it came from a conquered bird?"

"All the more appropriate for a plume to be worn by me."

"Why so, sir?"

"Because of my being vanquished, too."

"*You* vanquished, Mr Trevor! When? where? By whom?" she asked, at the same time mentally interrogating herself. Could he be alluding to that combat in which he received the wound brought with him to Hollymead, the story of which had leaked out, though not told by either combatant. Or, was he hinting at conquest of another kind?

There was an indescribable expression on her countenance as she sat awaiting his answer – keen anxiety, ill-concealed under an air of pretended artlessness.

"Vaga!"

It was not he who pronounced her name; though "Vaga," with "Powell" adjoined, were the words nearest to his lips. She would have given the world to hear him speak them. But it could not be then. Her sister had called to her, at that moment approaching with Sir Richard. Most ill-timed approach, for it interrupted a dialogue which, allowed to continue, might, and likely would, have ended in declarations of love – confessions full and mutual.

Chapter Fifteen
"Dear Little Mer."

"Turn and turn, sister," said Sabrina, as she rode up. "You've had sport enough with your great eagles. Suppose we go up to the hill, and give my dear little Mer a cast-off?"

"Dear little Mer" was a merlin, that sate perched on her left wrist, in size to the peregrines as a bantam cock to the biggest of chanticleers. Withal a true falcon, and game as the gamest of them.

Why its mistress proposed changing the scene of their sport was that no larks nor buntings – the merlin's special quarry – were to be met with by the marsh. Their habitat was higher up on the ridge, where there was a tract bare of trees – part pasture, part fallow.

To her sister's very reasonable request Vaga did not give the readiest assent. The petted young lady looked, and likely felt, some little vexed at her *tête-à-tête* with Eustace Trevor having been so abruptly brought to an end. It had promised to make that spot – amid reeds and rushes though it was – hallowed to her, as another on the summit of a certain hill, among hazels and hollies, had been made to her sister. Whatever her thoughts, she showed reluctance to leave the low ground, saying in rejoinder, —

"Oh! certainly, Sab. But won't you wait till the dogs have finished beating the sedge?"

"If you wish it, of course. But you don't expect them to find another heron?"

"No; but there may be a widgeon or wild duck. After such an easy victory, I'm sure my pers would like to have another flight. See how they chafe at their hoods and pull upon the jesses! Ah, my beauties! you want to hear the *hooha-ha-ha-ha* again – that do you."

"Oh! let them, then," said the more compliant Sabrina, "if the dogs put up anything worth flying them at; which I doubt their doing. We've made too much noise for that."

The conjecture of the sage sister proved correct. For the marsh, quartered to its remotest corners, yielded neither widgeons nor wild ducks; only moor-hens and water-rails – quarry too contemptible to fly the great falcons at.

"Now," said Sabrina, "I suppose you'll consent to the climbing?"

Her motto might have been *Excelsior*; she seemed always urging an uphill movement.

But there was no longer any objection made to it; and the canines being called out of the sedge, all entered the forest, riders and followers afoot, and commenced winding by a wood-path up the steep acclivity of Ruardean's ridge.

When upon its crest, which they soon after reached, the grand panorama already spoken of lay spread before their eyes. For they were on the same spot from which the young ladies had viewed it that day when Hector harassed the donkey. Neither of them bestowed a look upon it now; nor did Sabrina even glance at that road winding down from the Wilderness, off which on the former occasion she had been unable to take her eyes. Its interest for her no longer had existence; he who had invested it with such being by her side. Now she but thought of showing off the capabilities of "dear little Mer," as in fondness she was accustomed to call the diminutive specimen of the *falconidae*.

Ere long Mer made exhibition of her high strain and training – for the little falcon was also a female – sufficient to prove herself neither *tercel* nor *haggard*. First she raked down a lark, then a corn bunting; and at the third cast-off overtook and bound on to a turtle-dove, big as herself. For all she speedily brought it to the earth, there instantly killing it.

Just as she had brought this quarry to ground a cry was heard, which caused interruption of the sport, —

"Soldiers!"

It was the falconer who so exclaimed; for now that they were merlin-flying his services were scarce required, and one of his aids did the whistling and whooping. Left at leisure to look around, his eyes had strayed up the road beyond Drybrook, there to see what had called forth his cry.

Instantly all other eyes went the same way, more than one voice muttering in confirmation, —

"Yes; they're soldiers."

This was evident from their uniformity of dress – all alike, or nearly – as also by the glancing of arms and accoutrements. Moreover, they were in military formation, riding in file, "by twos" – for they were on horseback.

At sight of them all thoughts of sport were at an end, and the hawking was instantly discontinued. Mer, lured back to her mistress's wrist, was once more hooded, and the leash run through the *varvels* of her jesses; while the falconer and his helps, with the other attendants, gathered into a group preparatory to leaving the field.

Meanwhile, by no accident, but evidently from previous understanding, Sir Richard Walwyn and Eustace Trevor had drawn their horses together, at some distance from the spot occupied by the ladies, the knight saying, —

"It's Wintour's troop from Lydney, I take it. What do *you* think, Master Trevor?"

"The same as yourself. Nay, more, I'm sure of it, now. That's my cousin Rej at their head, on the grey mare, with the red feathers in his hat. You remember them?"

"I do. You're right; 'tis he. Somebody beside him, though, who appears to be in command. Don't you see him turn in his saddle, as though calling back orders?"

"Yes, yes;" was the repetitive rejoinder, Eustace Trevor, despite his late sojourn at Court, still retaining some of the idiomatic forms of Welsh colloquy. "But who are those in the rear?" he added, interrogatively.

His question had reference to a number of men afoot, neither in uniform nor formation, who were seen coming behind the horse troop, pressing close upon its heels. Women among them, too, as could be told by the brighter hues and looser draping of their dresses.

"People from Mitcheldean," answered Sir Richard, "following the troop out of curiosity, no doubt."

The knight knew better; knew that, but for himself, and some action he had lately taken, the people spoken of, or at least the majority of them, would not have been there. For, since his arrival at Hollymead, he had made many excursions unaccompanied – save by his henchman, Hubert – to Mitcheldean, Coleford, and other Forest centres, where he had held converse with many people – spoken words of freedom, which had found ready and assenting response. Therefore, as he now gazed at that crowd of civilians coming on after the soldiers, though his glance was one of inquiry, it was not as to who they were who composed it, but to make estimate of their numbers, at the same time comparing it with the strength of the troop.

There was no time left him to arrive at any exactitude. The horsemen were on the way to Hollymead, for sure; and he must needs be there before – long before them.

So the hawking party made no longer stay on Ruardean Hill, but a start and return homeward – so rapid as to seem retreat; the understrappers and other attendants wondering why it was so – all save Hubert.

Chapter Sixteen
Trouble Anticipated

On return for Hollymead, the hawking party did not pass through Ruardean, as it would have been round about. Nevertheless, Sir Richard went that way. At a forking of the forest paths the knight excused himself to the ladies, leaving Eustace Trevor to escort them home; he, with his own servant, turning off towards the village.

Some matter of importance must have influenced him to deviate from the direct route; and that it was pressing might be deduced from the speed to which he put his horse. Soon as parted from the others, he and Hubert made free use of their spurs, going in reckless gallop down the steepest pitches, nor drawing bridle till they had reached Ruardean. A small place then as now, of some two hundred houses, contiguous to a fine old church, and ancient hostelry opposite, the streets all declivities, with some scattered dwellings that radiated off into quaint nooks and by-ways.

The clattering of hoofs had brought faces to every window, and figures into every door; for this had been heard long before the two horsemen made their appearance. And now, as these came to a halt in front of the inn, their horses breathing hard, all eyes were bent upon them with inquiring curiosity.

“Wind your horn, Hubert!” commanded the knight, in an undertone, without waiting for any one to come up to them.

A command which Hubert instantly obeyed by drawing a small cornet from under his doublet, clapping it to his lips, and sounding the “Assembly.” He had been troop-trumpeter in “the army that swore so terribly in Flanders,” and so understood the cavalry calls.

No cavalry, however, answered this one, nor soldiers of any arm; though it was answered by what looked the right material for making soldiers. Before the cornet’s notes had ceased reverberating from the tower of the church, and the walls of the old castle – then in ruins – men could be seen issuing from the doors of the nearer houses, others hastening along the lanes from those more remote, all making for the spot where the horsemen were halted.

In a few seconds nearly twenty had gathered, up and grouped around the horses; the expression on their faces showing that they understood the signal in a general way, but not the reason for its having been sounded to summon them just then. All looked inquiry, one putting it in the form of speech, —

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.