Reid Mayne

The White Gauntlet

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Содержание

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Volume One – Chapter One

A woman in a wood – encountered accidentally, and alone. 'Tis an encounter to challenge curiosity – even though she be but a gipsy, or a peasant girl gathering sticks.

If a high-born dame, beautiful, – and, above all, bright-haired, – curiosity is no longer the word; but admiration, involuntary, unrestrained – bordering upon adoration. It is but the instinct of man's heart to worship the fairest object, upon which man's eye may rest; and this is a beautiful woman, with bright hair, met in the middle of a wood.

Marion Wade possessed all the conditions to merit such exalted admiration. She was high-born, beautiful, and bright-haired. She was alone in a wood.

It did not detract from the interest of the situation, that she was mounted on a white horse, carried a hawk on her hand, and was followed by a hound.

She was unaccompanied by human creature – hawk, hound, and horse being her only companions.

It must have been her choice to be thus unattended. Wishing it, the daughter of Sir Marmaduke Wade might have had for escort a score of retainers.

Autumn was in the sky: and along with it a noon-day sun. The golden light straggling through the leaves was reflected upon a field of blue, brilliant as the canopy whence it came. It was not the blue of the hyacinth gleaming in the forest glade, nor the modest violet that empurples the path. In October it could not be either. More attractive was that cerulean tint, seen in the iris of a woman's eye – the eye of Marion Wade.

The sunbeams danced upon her yellow hair, with apparent delight, kissing its tresses of kindred colour – kissing her radiant cheek, that, even under the shadow of the trees, looked luminous.

What does she in the wild wood unguarded – unattended? Is she a-hawking?

The kestrel perched upon her gloved hand should say, yes. But more than once game has sprung up temptingly before her; and still the hood has been suffered to stay upon the hawk, and its jesses are retained in leash.

Has she lost her way – is she wandering?

Equally unlike. She is upon a path. A noble park is in sight, with a road that runs parallel to its palings. Through the trees she can obtain glimpses of a stately mansion standing within its enclosure. It is the famed park of Bulstrode – ancient as Alfred the Great. As she is the mistress of its mansion she cannot have lost her way? She cannot be wandering?

And yet, why does she fret her palfrey in its paces – now checking, now urging it onward? If not wandering in her way, surely is she astray in her thoughts?

She does not appear to be satisfied with the silent solitude of that forest path: she stops at short intervals, and leans forward in her saddle, as if listening for sounds.

Her behaviour would lead to the belief, that she is expecting some one?

A hoof-stroke is heard. There is a horseman coming through the wood. He is not yet in sight; but the sound of his horse's hoofs striking the solid turf – tells that he is riding upon the track, and towards her.

There is an opening in the forest glade, of some six roods in extent. It is cut in twain by a path, which parts from the high road near one of the gates of Bulstrode Park; thence treading over the hills in a north-westerly direction.

On this path rides Marion Wade, straying, or dallying – certainly not travelling.

She has entered the aforementioned opening. Near its centre stands a tree – a beech of magnificent dimensions – whose wide-spreading boughs seem determined to canopy the whole area of the opening. The road runs beneath its branches.

Under its shadow, the fair equestrian checks her palfrey to a stand – as if to shelter, hawk, hound, and horse, from the fervent rays of the noon-day sun.

But no: her object is different. She has halted there to wait the approach of the horseman; and, at this moment, neither hawk, hound, nor horse claims the slightest share of her thoughts.

She sits scanning the road in the direction whence the hoof-strokes are heard. Her eyes sparkle with a pleasant anticipation.

The horseman soon appears, cantering around a corner – a rustic in rude garb, astride of a common roadster!

Surely he is not the expected one of Marion Wade?

The question is answered by the scornful exclamation that escapes from her pouted lips.

"'Sh! I might have known by the clattering it wasn't the footfall of that noble steed. A peasant!"

The despised rustic rides on – as he passes making awkward obeisance, by a spasmodic pluck at his forelock.

His salutation is scarcely returned: or only with a nod, apparently supercilious. He wonders at this: for he knows that the lady is the daughter of Sir Marmaduke Wade – Mistress Marion – usually so condescending to, and a favourite with, all of his class. He cannot guess the chagrin he has given her.

He is soon out of her sight, and equally out of her thoughts: for it is not the sound of his departing hoof-strokes her ear is now re-quickened to catch; but others of bolder bound, and clearer resonance awaking the echoes of the wood.

These are soon heard more distinctly; and presently a second horseman appears, advancing around an angle of the road.

A striking contrast does the new comer present to the rustic who has just ridden past. A cavalier of elegant carriage, spurred and plumed; mounted on a superb steed, of jet-black colour – his counter clouted with flakes of snow-white froth loosened from his chamfering lips.

A glance at the horse is sufficient to show that he is the "noble steed" mentioned in that muttered soliloquy; and half a glance at the rider proclaims him the individual for whom Marion Wade has been waiting.

As yet she has not given him half a glance. She has not even turned her eyes in the direction whence he is approaching. She sits silent in her saddle, and to all appearance calmly indifferent. But this air of *insouciance* is only assumed. The quivering of the kestrel, roosted upon her wrist, tells that she is trembling; while the high heaving of her bosom indicates the presence of some strong emotion.

Going at a gentle gallop, the horseman glides out into the opening.

Perceiving the lady, he checks his steed to a slower pace – as if to pass more respectfully.

Marion continues to affect an air of non-observance – studied and severe: though the cavalier coming forward, is at that moment the sole subject of her thoughts.

Her reflections will disclose the character of these thoughts; and enable us to obtain an insight into the relations existing between these two splendid equestrians, whom chance, or design, has brought together upon the lonely forest road.

"If he should speak to me," soliloquises the lady, "what shall I say to him? What can I? He must know it is not accident that has brought me hither – and now so often. If I thought he knew the truth, I should die of shame!

"I wish him to speak; and yet I fear it. Ah! there need be no fear. He will not. How many times has he passed me without a word! And yet his glances – do they not tell me that he would – Oh! – this etiquette of out high life – that without shame strangers may not be civil to one another!

"Would I were a peasant – and he the same – only handsome as he is now! 'Tis cruel, to be thus constrained by silly social custom! My sex, too, against me. I dare not speak first. Even in *his* eyes it would undo me!

"He is going to pass me as before? Is there no way by which this painful reticence may be removed?"

The fair equestrian appeared to ponder on some plan – only half-formed and half-resolved, as her muttered reflections indicated.

"Dare I do it? What would my proud father say, if he were to know? Even gentle cousin Lora would chide me? A stranger whose name I only know, and that's all. Perhaps *not a gentleman*? Oh – yes – yes – yes! He can not be other. He may not be a lord of the land – but he is *lord of my poor heart*! I cannot restrain myself from soliciting him – even if it bring shame and repentance. I shall do it – I shall do it!"

The speech betrayed a determination. To do what?

The act itself, following close upon the words, answered the question. With a quick jerk the lady dislodged the kestrel from its perch, tossing the bird to the neck of her palfrey – where it clung, clutching the snow-white mane. Then drawing off her glove, a *white gauntlet*, she dropped it negligently by her side – permitting it to slide down the skirt of her riding-dress. It fell into the middle of the road.

A short moment intervened. The lady apparently unconscious of the loss she had sustained, tightened the rein upon her palfrey, and with a slight touch of the whip moved out from under the branches of the beech – her horse's head turned in a direction opposite to that in which the cavalier was approaching.

At first she rode slowly – apparently desirous of being overtaken. Presently she increased the pace; then faster, and faster, until she went at a gallop – as though by a sudden change of thought she had determined to avoid an interview! The thick tresses of her golden hair escaping from the comb swept down upon the croup behind her. The natural red of her cheeks had become heightened to the hue of carmine. It was the suffusion of burning blushes. Her eyes were flashing with a strange excitement in an expression that spoke of something like shame. She had repented of what she had done, and dreaded to wait the consequence of the act!

For all that she was dying to look back, but dared not.

A turn in the road, at length, offered her the opportunity. As she reined her palfrey around the corner, she glanced towards the spot where she had abandoned her glove.

The tableau that saluted her eye was not displeasing. The cavalier, bending down from his saddle, was just lifting the gauntlet upon the point of his glistening rapier!

What would he do with it?

She waited not to see. Her palfrey passed behind the trees, and the horseman was hidden from her sight. On that splendid steed he might easily have overtaken her: but, although listening, as she rode on, she heard no hoof-stroke behind her.

She did not desire to be overtaken. For that day she had submitted herself to sufficient humiliation – self-administered – it is true; but she slackened not the pace, till she has passed through the gates of the park, and sighted the walls of the paternal mansion.

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If tumultuous were the emotions of Marion Wade, as she let fall that significant token, not less so were those of *Henry Holtspur* as he took it up.

Had the lady remained a moment longer looking back, she would have seen her glove taken gently from the point of the cavalier's sword, pressed with a wild fervour to his lips, and proudly placed alongside the plume in the frontlet of his beaver.

She only saw that her challenge had been accepted; and, with a thrill of sweet satisfaction, contending against a sense of shame, she had ridden rapidly away.

The cavalier, equally gratified, appeared also perplexed: as if hesitating whether he should follow. But the abrupt departure of the lady seemed to say that pursuit was prohibited; and, checking his ardour, along with his steed, he remained by the tree, under the shadow of which he had halted.

For some minutes he sate in his saddle, apparently absorbed in reflections. That they were not all of one character was evinced by the expression upon his countenance, which kept continually changing. Now it betokened triumph, with its concomitant pleasure; anon could be traced the lines that indicated doubt, accompanied by pain; and, once or twice, an expression that told of regret, or *remorse*, was visible. These facial changes will be better understood by giving in detail the thoughts that were causing them.

Was it intended for a challenge? Can I doubt it? Had the incident been alone, I might have deemed it accidental. But the many times we have met – and upon this lone road! Why should she come this way, unless – ? And her looks? On each occasion bolder, and *lovelier*! Oh! how sweet to be thus favoured! How different from that other love, that has had such unhappy ending! Then I was prized but for my position, my prospects, and my fortune. When these fell from me, only to be forsaken!

"If she love me, her love cannot rest on circumstances like these. She knows me not – not even my name! That she may have heard, can suggest neither rank, nor fortune. *If she love me, it must be for myself*? 'Tis a thrilling thought – thus to believe!"

The eye of the cavalier lighted up with an expression of triumph; and he sate proudly erect in his saddle.

Only for a short time did he preserve this high attitude. Reflections of a far different character succeeded, dissipating the happiness he had for the moment experienced.

"She will know in time? She *must* know? Even I, myself, must tell her the terrible secret. And then what is to become of this sweet, but transient, dream? It will be all over; and instead of her love, I shall become the object of her hatred – her scorn? O God! To think it must end thus! To think that I have *won*, and yet can never *wear*!"

The features of the speaker became overspread with a deep gloom.

"Why did I enter upon this intrigue? Why have I permitted it to proceed? Why do I desire its continuance? To all these questions the answer is the same. Who could have resisted? Who could resist? It is not in man's nature to behold such beauty, without yearning to possess it. As Heaven is my witness, I have struggled to subdue this unholy passion – to destroy it – to pluck it forth from my bosom. I have tried to shun the presence of her who inspires it. Perhaps I might have succeeded, had not she. Alas! I have no longer the power to retreat. That is gone, and the will as well. I must on – on – like the insect lured by some fatal light, to a self-sought and certain destruction!"

It was then that remorse became plainly depicted upon the countenance of the cavalier. What could be causing it? That was a secret he scarcely dared declare to himself.

"After all," he continued, a new train of thought seeming to suggest itself, "what if it be an accident – this, that has made me at once so happy, and yet so wretched? Her looks, too – those glances that have gladdened my heart, at the same time awaking within me a consciousness of wrongdoing,

as, too ardently, I gave them back – may I not have misinterpreted them? If she intended that I should take up this glove – that I should restore it to her – why did she not stay to receive it? Perhaps I have been misconceiving her motives? After all, am I the victim of an illusion – following but an *ignis fatuus* kindled by my own vanity?"

At the moment the look of remorse gave place to one of chagrin. The cavalier appeared no longer to regret being too much loved; but rather that he might not be loved at all – a reflection far more painful.

"Surely! I cannot be mistaken. I saw it on her hand but the instant before – with the hawk perched upon it. I saw her suddenly fling the bird to the neck of the horse, and draw off the gauntlet, which the next moment fell from her fingers! Surely it was design?"

He raised his hand to his hat; took the glove from its place; and once more pressed it to his lips.

"Oh, that her hand were in it!" he enthusiastically exclaimed, yielding to a sweet fancy. "If it were her fingers I held thus to my lips – thus unresisting – then might I believe there was bliss upon earth!"

A footstep, falling upon his ear, interrupted the enraptured speech. It was light, betokening the proximity of a woman, or rather the presence of one: for, on turning, his eye rested upon a female figure, standing by the side of his horse.

The cavalier saw before him a comely face – and something more. He might have deemed it beautiful; but for that other still present to his intellectual eye, and altogether engrossing his thoughts.

It was a young girl who had thus silently intruded: and one worthy of a gracious reception, despite the peasant garb in which she had presented herself.

Both face and figure were such as could not be regarded with indifference, nor dismissed without reflection. Neither owed aught to the adornment of art; but to both had nature been liberal, even to profuseness.

A girl, closely approximating to womanhood, largely framed, and finely developed – in arms, limbs, bust, and body, exhibiting those oval outlines that indicate the possession of strong passions and powers.

Such was the creature who stood by the horse of Henry Holtspur.

But for their blackness, her eyes might have been likened to those of an eagle; but for its softness, her hair resembled the tail of his own steed – equally long and luxuriant; and her teeth – there could have been nothing whiter, even among the chalk of the Chilterns – her native hills.

Robed in silk, satin, or velvet, it was a form that would have done no discredit to a queen. Encircled with pearls or precious diamonds, it was a face of which a princess might have been proud. Even under the ordinary homespun of a rustic gown, that form looked queenly – beneath those glossy plaits of crow-black hair – bedecked with some freshly-plucked flowers – that face might have inspired envy in a princess.

In the glance bestowed upon her by the cavalier there was no sign – either of surprise or admiration. It was simply a look of recognition, accompanied by a nod, acknowledging her presence.

In the eye of the maiden there was no such indifference. The most careless observer could have told, that she was in love with the man upon whom she was now gazing.

The horseman took no heed of her admiring glances. Perhaps he noticed them not. His attention was altogether given to an object, which the girl held in her outstretched hand, and which was instantly transferred to his. It was a letter, sealed and directed to himself.

"Thanks!" said he, breaking open the seal. "Your father has brought this from Uxbridge, I suppose?"

"He has, sir. He sent me with it; and bid me ask you if there be an answer to go back. As you were not at the house, I brought it here. I hope I have done right, sir?"

"Oh, certainly! But how did you know where to find me? My tongueless attendant, Oriole, could not have told you?"

"He made sign, sir, that you had taken this road. I thought I should meet you here; and father said it might be important for you to have the letter at once."

The red blood mantled higher upon the girl's cheeks, as she offered this explanation. She knew she had exceeded her father's instructions; which had been, simply, to leave the letter at "Stone Dean," the residence of Henry Holtspur.

The cavalier, occupied with the epistle, noticed neither her blushes nor embarrassment.

"'Tis very considerate of you," said he, turning gratefully towards the girl, as he finished reading the letter. "Your father has guessed correctly. It is of the greatest importance that I should have had this letter in good time. You may tell him that it needs no reply. I must answer it in person, and at once. But say, Mistress Betsey; what return can I make you for this kind service? You want a ribbon for your beautiful black hair? What colour is it to be? I think blue – such as those flowers are – does not so well become you. Shall it be a red one?"

The words, though courteously intended, fell with an unpleasant effect upon the ear of her to whom they were addressed. They were not the speeches to which she would fain have listened.

"Thanks, sir," said she, in a tone that betrayed pique, or some other unlooked-for emotion. "A fine ribbon would scarce suit my coarse common hair. These flowers are good enough for it!"

"Ah! Mistress Betsey! Your beautiful tresses can bear this disparagement: you know they are neither coarse nor common. Nay; if you refuse the ribbon, you must accept the price of one. I cannot allow, that the essential service you have done me should go unrewarded. Take this piece of gold; and make purchase with it to suit yourself – scarf, gown, or gloves – whichever you please."

Somewhat to the cavalier's surprise, his liberal largess was rejected – not with scorn, but rather with an air of sadness – sufficiently marked to have been noticed by him, had he not been altogether unsuspicious of the cause.

"Well – well," said he, putting back the coin into his purse, "I am sorry you will not permit me to make some amends for your kindness. Perhaps I may find an opportunity on some future occasion? Meanwhile I must be gone. The letter you have delivered summons me hence, – without delay. Many thanks, Mistress Betsey, and a fair good morning to you!"

A touch of the spur caused his chafing steed to spring out into the middle of the road; and the rider, heading him for the highway that conducted towards Uxbridge, soon swept round the corner – at the same instant, becoming lost to the sight of the dark-eyed damsel – whose glance, full of passion and disappointment, had followed him to the point of his disappearance.

Volume One – Chapter Three

The girl listened awhile to the departing hoof-strokes, as they came back with clear resonance from the hard causeway. Then, dropping her eyes to the ground, she stood silent under the tree – her swarth complexion still further darkened by sombre shadows, now overspreading every feature of her face.

Not long did she continue in this silent attitude.

"I would have taken the ribbon," muttered she, "as a gift – if he had meant it that way. But it wasn't so. No. It was only as *wages* he offered it to me; and his money – that was worse. Had it been a lock of his hair. Ah! I would rather he gave me that than all the gold coins in his purse, or all the silk in the shops of Uxbridge."

"He called my hair beautiful: twice he said so!"

"Did he mean it? Or was it only mocking of me? I am sure I do not think so myself, though others have told me the same. I wish it were fair, instead of dark, like that of Mistress Marion Wade. Then perhaps, it would be beautiful?

"Blue don't become me, he says. Lie there despised colour! Never more shall blue blossom be seen in the hair of Bet Dancey."

As she said this she plucked the bunch of hare-bells from behind her comb, and flung the flowers at her feet.

"It was Will that gave them to me," she continued. "He only gathered them an hour ago. What if he were to see them now? Ah! what care I? What should I care? I never gave him reason – not the least bit. They were worn to-day, not to please *him*; but in hopes of pleasing one I do care for. Had I thought that that one liked not blue, there were plenty of red ones in the old garden of Stone Dean. I might have gathered some as I came through it. What a pity I didn't know the colour he likes best!"

"Ha!" she exclaimed, starting forward upon the path, and bending down over the spot where the flowers had fallen – and where the dust shewed signs of having been recently disturbed. "That is not the track of *his* horse. That little shoe – I know it – Mistress Marion Wade!"

For a second or two, the speaker preserved her stooping attitude, silently regarding the tracks. She saw they were fresh – that they had been made that morning – in fact, within the hour.

Her father was a forester – a woodman by calling – at times, a *stealer of deer*. She had been born in the forest – brought up under the shadow of its trees. She was capable of interpreting that sign – too capable for the tranquillity of her spirit.

"Mistress Marion has been here!" she muttered. "Of late, often have I seen these tracks; and twice the lady herself. What brings her along this lonely road? What has she been doing here this morning? – Could it be to meet *him*?"

She had no time to conjecture a response to this self-asked interrogatory. As the words passed from her lips, her attention was attracted to the sound of hoofs – a horse moving at a gallop along the main road.

Could it be the cavalier coming back?

No. It was a peasant, on a sorry steed – the same who had passed the other way scarcely an hour before – the same who had given chagrin to Mistress Marion Wade.

It was the woodman, Will Walford.

The girl appeared desirous of shunning him; but he had caught sight of her crimson cloak, and an encounter was unavoidable.

"Aw, Bet! be it thee, girl?" he cried out, as he came within speaking distance. "Why it beeant all o' an hour since I left thee at thy hum! What's brought thee this way?"

"Father got home, soon after you left. He came by the wood path, and missed you, I suppose."

"Like enough for that part o' the story," replied the man, appearing to suspect prevarication; "But that a'nt giein a answer to my question. I asked as how you yerself coomed this way?"

"Oh! me you mean, Will?"

"Ees – myself Bet!"

"Father brought a letter from Uxbridge for Master Holtspur. He was tired when he got home; and, as you had the old horse, he sent me over to Stone Dean with it."

"But Stone Dean a'nt here – not by a good half-mile."

"I went there first. Master Holtspur wasn't at home; and as the dummy made signs that he was gone along the road, and would be soon back, I followed him. Father said the letter was important; and told me to give it to Master Holtspur at once."

"You seed Holtspur then?"

"I did; Will. I overtook him where he was stopping here, under the old beech tree."

"And what did thee then?"

"Give him the letter – what else should I do?"

"Ay, what else? Dang it, Bet Dancey, thee art too fond o' runnin' after other people's business, an' this Master Holtspur's in particklar – that's what thee be."

"It was my father's business. What had I to do with the letter but deliver it, as I was told?"

"Never mind about it then!" rejoined the surly sweetheart, whose incipient jealousy was somewhat appeased by the explanation. "Jump up, an' ride behint! I han't got the pillion; but you won't mind that: since it's your own nag, and knows it's you, Bet. He'll make his old rump soft as a cushion for you. Hi – hullo! where's the blue blossoms I gied you for your hair? Dang me if that beant them, scattered over the ground thear!"

"Indeed!" said Bet, with a feigned look of surprise, "so it is! They must have fallen out, as I was fixing my comb. Father started me off in such a hurry, I hadn't half time to put it in its place. This hair of mine's a bother, anyhow. It's by half too thick, and gives me constant trouble to keep it pinned up. I shall have it cut short, I think; like those Puritan people, who are getting to be so plenty. How would you like that, Will?"

"Dang it! not at all. It would never do to crop thy bonny locks that fashion. 'Twould complete spoil it. Never mind them flowers, lass! Thear be plenty more where they coom from; an' I'm a bit hurried just now to see thy father. Yee up, then; an' let us haste home'rd."

The girl, not without some show of reluctance, obeyed, what appeared as much a mandate as a request; and, climbing to the croup, she extended her arms round the waist of him, who – though calling himself her lover – was, to her, an object of fear rather than affection.

Volume One – Chapter Four

Having re-entered the gates of the park, Marion Wade checked her palfrey into a walk; and, at this pace, continued on towards the paternal mansion.

The scarlet that late tinted her cheeks had become subdued. There was pallor in its place. Her lips even showed signs of blanching.

In her eye there was a cowed look – as if she had committed crime, and feared discovery! But gazing on that face, you could scarce think of crime. It was too fair to be associated with sin.

She sate negligently in her saddle – the undulating outlines of her majestic form rendered more conspicuous by the movements of her palfrey, as it strained up the acclivity of the hill.

The hawk had been restored to its perch; but the gauntlet no longer shielded her wrist; and the *pounces* of the bird, penetrating the tender skin, had drawn blood. A tiny stream laced the silken epidermis of her hand, and trickled to the tips of her fingers.

She felt not the wound. She beheld not the blood. The emotions of her soul deadened the external senses; and, absorbed in the contemplation of her rash act – half repenting of it – she was conscious of nought else, till her palfrey came to a stop under the windows of the dwelling.

Giving her bridle to a groom, she dropped lightly to her feet; and glided silently towards a side-door of the house – intending to enter unobserved. In her own chamber she might more securely give way to that tumult of thoughts and passions, now agitating her bosom.

Her design was frustrated. As she approached the portal, a clear voice, ringing along the corridor, called her by name; and, the instant after a fair form – almost as fair as her own – issuing forth, glided up by her side.

It was Lora – the cousin spoken of in her late soliloquy – Lora Lovelace.

"Give me the little pet," cried Lora, reaching forward, and lifting the hawk from its perch. "Oh, Marion!" continued she, drawing back at sight of the blood. "What is this? You are wounded?"

"Ah! indeed yes. I did not notice it before. The kestrel must have caused it. The wicked jade. Her claws need coping. Don't trouble about it, child. It's nothing."

"But where is your gauntlet, Marion? If it had been on your hand, you would not have got scratched in this fashion?"

"Ah! the gauntlet? Where is it? Let me see!"

Marion made search about her dress – in the crown of her beaver – everywhere that might give concealment to a glove. An idle search.

"I must have dropped it!" added she, feigning surprise. "Perhaps it is sticking somewhere about the saddle? If not, I must have lost it upon the road. It don't signify. I must buy me a new pair – that's all."

"Dearest cousin!" said Lora, speaking in a tone of earnest appeal, "the sight of blood always makes me think of danger. I am never happy when you are out alone on these distant hawking excursions. Marion, you should take attendants with you, or remain within the enclosures. I am sure there's danger outside."

"*Danger outside*! Ha! Ha! Perhaps you are right there, little Lora. Perhaps it's that which lures me beyond the palings of the park! When I go forth to hawk or hunt, I don't care to be cooped up by enclosures. Give me the wild game that has free range of the forest."

"But think, Marion! You know what we've heard about the highwaymen? It's true about the lady being stopped on Red Hill – in her carriage, too. Uncle says it is; and that these robbers are growing bolder every day, on account of the bad government. Oh, cousin! take my advice, and don't any more go out alone."

"Good counsel, daughter; though it be given you by one younger than yourself. I hope you will set store by it; and not leave me under the necessity of strengthening it by a command."

The tall middle-aged gentleman, of noble serious mien – who stepping forth, had entered thus abruptly into the conversation – was Sir Marmaduke Wade, the father of Marion, and uncle of Lora.

"Your cousin speaks truly," continued he, "and it's well I am reminded of it. There's no longer any safety on the roads. Not much in one's own house, so far as that goes: for there are two kinds of robbery just now rife in this unhappy land – in the king's court, as on the king's highway. Henceforth, children, confine your rambles within the limits of the park. Even with attendants, you may not be safe outside."

"That is true," affirmed Lora. "The lady who was stopped had several attendants – I think you said so, uncle?"

"Six, of different sorts, escorting her carriage. In sooth a valiant escort! They all scampered off. Of course they did. How could they be loyal, with a corrupt administration, such as ours, destroying every vestige of loyalty and honesty in the realm? Men are sure to become vile – if only to imitate their masters. But come, my children! Let us hope for better times: and, to keep up the character of merry Old England, I've planned an entertainment for you – one that all our friends and neighbours are to take part in."

"What is it?" asked Lora, whose spirit was, at the moment, more highly attuned to the idea of pastime, than that of her silent cousin.

"*A fête champètre*."

"Where? Here? In our own park?"

"In our own park, of course."

"And who are to be invited, dear uncle?"

"Everybody for ten miles round; and farther, if they choose to come. I don't mind an ox or two extra for the occasion."

"Occasion! what, uncle? It isn't Christmas! – it isn't Whitsuntide! – nor yet May-day!"

"Can you think of nothing except holidays? What say you to a birthday?"

"Oh! true; Walter's will be next week. But, papa, is brother coming home?"

"That's it. He is to arrive on the eve of his birthday. Poor lad! he's been a long while from us; not long enough, I hope, to get spoiled in a dangerous school. Well, we must give him a welcome worthy of old Bucks. And now, girls! go to work; and see that you do your share in making preparation for our guests."

With this parting injunction, the knight turned back into the house, leaving his niece and daughter to discuss the pleasant subject he had placed before them.

For some seconds, after he was gone, there was no exchange of speech between the cousins. Each was absorbed in her own thoughts.

"Oh! 'twill be a happy day: for Walter will be here!" was the secret reflection of Lora.

Marion's, in a somewhat similar strain, were less affirmative: —

"Oh! 'twould be a happy day, if Holtspur should be here!"

Volume One – Chapter Five

Autumn was still in the sky; but it had passed its mid time, and the beechen forests of Bucks were enrobed in their livery of yellow green. The cuckoo had forsaken the copse; and the swallows were making rendezvous on the spire of the village church. The ringdove sate silent in the dell; and the wood-quests were gathering into groups. The pheasant ventured with her young brood beyond the cover-edge; the partridge carried her chicks across the stubble; and finch, sparrow, and linnet were forming their respective families into full-fledged cohorts – in preparation for those dark, chill days, when they should need such companionship to cheer them.

In truth, it is a right fair land, this same shire of Bucks – lovely in its spring-tide, fair in its summer bloom, and fairer still in its October. You may travel far, without beholding a spot more bewitching than the land of the beechen "weed;" and embosomed within the undulating arms of the Chilterns is many a spot worthy of wider renown. The mountain you meet not; the lake is rare; but the softly-swelling hill, and deep romantic dale, are ever before and around you; and the eye of traveller, or tourist, is continually attracted to scenes of sylvan beauty, upon which it long delights to linger.

So thought a youthful stripling, astride a stout steed, as, emerging from the town-end of Uxbridge, he rode over the old bridge crossing the Colne.

The sun was just sinking behind the Chiltern hills, whose forest-clad spurs stretched down into the plain – as if to meet and welcome him.

It was a fair landscape that unfolded itself before his eyes. Upon the ridge of Red Hill the rays of the descending sun slanted among the leaves of the beeches, heightening their yellow sere to the hue of gold. Here and there the wild cherry tree, of more radiant foliage, the green oak, and the darker green of the holly, mottled the slope; while on either flank, lying low among the hills, the valleys of Alderbourne and Chalfont were gradually becoming shrouded under the purple shadows of the twilight.

Right and left meandered the Colne, through meadows of emerald verdure – its broad unrippled surface reflecting the sapphire sky; while on its banks appeared herds of sleek kine, slowly lounging along the grassy sward, or standing motionless in the stream – as if placed there to give the last touch to a scene typical of tranquillity and contentment.

It was a scene worthy of Watteau or Cuyp – a picture calculated to create a quiet joy even in the breast of a stranger. So might have thought Walter Wade, who, after long absence from this his native shire, now, gazing on its wood-embowered hills and valleys recognised the *mise en scène* of his boyhood's home!

The young traveller felt such a happiness. On cresting the high causeway of the old bridge – which brought the Chilterns full before his view – he reined up his horse in the middle of the road; while at the same time an ejaculation escaped from his lips, indicative of the pleasure which the sight afforded.

"Dear old Chilterns!" he exclaimed. "Friends you seem, with arms outstretched to receive me! How bright and fresh you look to one coming from that sooty London! What a pity I did not start an hour earlier – so that I might have enjoyed this fine sunset from the summit of Red Hill! No matter. There will be moonlight anon; and that will do just as well. Sunlight or moonlight, give me a ride through the beechen woods of Bucks. Charming at all hours!"

"I 'faith, I wonder," continued he, becoming more reflective in his soliloquy, "how any one can fancy a city life! I'm sure, I've been well enough placed to enjoy it. The queen has been very kind – very kind indeed. She has twice kissed me. And the king, too, has complimented me on my service – only at parting he was very angry with me. I don't know why. *I* did nothing to anger him.

"I wonder why I'm summoned home? Father don't say in his letter; but I suppose he'll tell me when I arrive there. No matter. I'm only too glad to get back to dear old Bulstrode. I hope that

inveterate deer-stealer, Dick Dancey, hasn't killed off all our deer. I mean to go in for some grand stalking this winter – that do I."

"Let me see! Three years – no; it will be three come Christmas – since I took service at Court. I shouldn't be surprised if cousin Lora is grown a big girl by this, and sister Marion too? Ah! Marion was big enough when I left. Lora won't be as tall as she. No: she wasn't the make for that Lora would be what the queen calls *petite*. For all that, I dare say she's got to be a grown woman. She was just my own age; and I think I may say, that I'm now a man. Heigho! how time passes!"

And, as if the reflection had suggested the necessity of making as much of the time as possible, the young horseman gave the whip to his steed; shot out from between the parapet walls of the bridge; and passed on at a canter.

Though Walter Wade had pronounced himself a man – somewhat modestly it must be admitted – the statement was scarcely correct; and the error must be attributed to a very common and pardonable weakness of boyhood, ambitious of entering upon manhood.

He was still only a stripling – a youth of nineteen – though well grown for his age; and in point of size might have passed muster among men. A slight moustache already appeared upon his upper lip. It was light-coloured, like his hair – neither of which was red, but of that Saxon "yellow" so often associated with eyes of blue, and which, when met with in woman, presents the fairest type of female beauty.

The Greeks – themselves a dark people, above all others skilled in feminine charms – have acknowledged this truth; though, by that acknowledgment, ignoring the claims of their own race.

To the spume of the sea was the Cyprian goddess indebted for the whiteness of her skin – to the blue sky for the colour of her eyes – to the golden sun for the hue of her hair. Among the classic ancients, the dark-haired Venus elicited but little admiration.

And not very different is the *partiality* of the moderns. The belle of the ball-room is invariably a *blonde*; and even the *nymphe du pavé*, who trails golden pennants from under the rim of her coquettish hat, looks scornfully askance at the darker tresses of her sister in sin!

It is odd that blue eyes do not admire blue eyes – that light-coloured tresses do not wish to be interwoven with those of a like hue. Is there an instinct of approximation between extremes? Do contrasts possess an innate desire for contiguity? If so, it would explain the *penchant* of the dark Athenians for the fair-skinned Cytherea.

There are fair-haired youths whom man may admire, and woman love. Walter Wade was such an one.

A forehead of fine expanse, crested with curling hair – a nose sufficiently aquiline to exhibit the true aristocratic breed – a chin prominent – lips typical of contempt for aught that was mean. Such were his features.

Gazing upon his face, you might not pronounce it handsome. For a man, it might appear too feminine. But if you were at all skilled in Saxon physiognomy, on seeing such a face, and knowing that the owner of it had a sister, you might safely set *her* down as a being of incomparable beauty.

It was not necessary to have overheard his soliloquy, to tell that he who made it was the scion of some distinguished house. The good steed he bestrode, caparisoned in costly fashion; the rich costume he wore; his sharply chiselled features, and aristocratic bearing – all betokened the *filius nobilis*.

He was, in effect, the son of Sir Marmaduke Wade, of Bulstrode Park; who could point to an ancestry older than the Conquest; and whose Saxon sires – along with the Bulstrodes, the Hampdens, and the Penns – had so doughtily defended their beechen woods and broad fields against the Norman invader, that the great Conqueror was pleased to compound with them for a continuance of their tenure. It was a family with whom kings had never been favourites. It had figured among the barons, who had forced the tyrant John to set his signature to the celebrated Charter of English liberty; and elsewhere have its representatives been found in the front rank of the champions of Freedom.

It may be wondered why young Walter Wade had been in the service of the Court – as declared in his soliloquy. That, however, is easily explained. An ambitious mother, of queenly inclinings – an uncle in high office near the throne – these will account for the son of Sir Marmaduke having stood as a page in the Presence.

But the mother's influence was now at an end. She was no more. And that of her brother – the uncle – was not strong enough to prevent Sir Marmaduke recalling his son from a Court – whose immorality had become the theme of every tongue; and whose contamination the fond father but too justly dreaded.

This was why the stripling was on his return to the paternal mansion; and why the king had shown displeasure at parting with him. It was a bold act on the part of the knight; and it might need all the influence of his official brother-in-law, to avert from him the vengeance of Charles – that most contemptible of tyrants.

It was not upon these things that Walter Wade was reflecting, as he rode onward. A pleasanter theme was the subject of his thoughts – his cousin Lora.

It was love's young dream – by some deemed the sweetest in life; is, perhaps, the most evanescent.

With Walter, it had not been so very fleeting. Starting at sixteen, it was now nearly three years old. It had stood the test of a long absence, and under circumstances most unfavourable to love's endurance: amid smiling maids of honour, and dames of high degree. Yes; Walter's heart had nobly repelled the blandishments of more than one belle; and this too in a Court famed for its *fair*.

That kiss, somewhat coyly granted by his cousin, "deep in a forest dell," where they had wandered in search of wild flowers – that soft pressure of Lora's little hand – those thrilling words, "Dear Walter," that on the same occasion had fallen from Lora's pretty lips – all were remembered, as if they had been incidents of yesterday.

Did *she* remember them with equal interest? This was the thought upon which Walter Wade had been dwelling, ever since parting from the portals of Whitehall Palace.

During his two years of absence, he had not been left altogether uninformed of what was passing at Bulstrode. Though in those days letters were written at long intervals – and then only on matters of grand importance – Walter had kept up a correspondence with Marion; with whom epistles had been exchanged regularly once a month. He dared not write to Lora – nor even *about* her. He knew what he said to his sister would be communicated to his little mistress; and he feared to show himself too solicitous. Every word in his letters, relating to his cousin, had been carefully studied – as to the impression it might produce – for in this sort of strategy, young love is as cunning as that of older hearts. At times the boy courtier even affected indifference about his cousin's affairs; and more than once there was danger of a quarrel – or at least a coolness. This was more especially the case, when his sister – ignorant of the pain she was producing – spoke of Lora's great beauty, and the havoc it was making among the hearts of the county beaux.

Perhaps had Marion passed these pretty compliments upon herself, she would have said nothing beyond what was true: for although Walter's cousin was beautiful and a belle, his sister was at that time the acknowledged "belle of the shire."

Volume One – Chapter Six

For the first half-mile after crossing the Colne, the thoughts of the young courtier had been given exclusively to his cousin. He recalled the old time – that scene in the silent dell – the kiss among the wild flowers – that proved her partiality for him. He remembered all these occurrences with a strong confidence in Lora's loyalty.

His fanciful reflections were suddenly, and somewhat rudely, interrupted.

On arriving at an inn that stood by the roadside, a spectacle was presented to his eyes which turned his thoughts into a different channel.

In a wide open space in front of the hostelry was a troop of horsemen. By their armour and equipments, Walter knew them to be *cuirassiers*, in the service of the king.

There were about fifty in the troop; and from the movements of the men, and the condition of their horses – still smoking from the march – it was evident they had come to a halt only a few minutes before.

The troopers had dismounted. Some of them were still occupied with their horses, helping them to provender; while others, who had already performed this duty, were seated under a huge old elm tree – joyously, as well as noisily, regaling themselves with such cheer as the hostelry afforded.

A glance at these roisterers told the young cavalier who and what they were: – a troop of the returned army from the north, that had been lately, and somewhat clandestinely, brought southward by the king.

This corps had originally been recruited in the Low Countries, and among them were several foreigners. Indeed, the smaller number were Englishmen; while there were many countenances of the true Gallic type, and a still larger proportion of those famed hirelings – who figured so largely in the wars of the time – the *Walloons*.

Amid the clamour of voices, with which the ears of the young courtier were assailed, he could hear French and Flemish commingled with his native tongue; while the oaths peculiar to all three nations, thickly interlarding the conversation, told him that he was in the presence of a remnant of that army that "swore so terribly in Flanders."

A crowd of the neighbouring rustics had collected around the inn; and stood with mouths agape, and countenances expressing unlimited astonishment at the sayings and doings of the strange steel-clad cavaliers who had dismounted in their midst.

To Walter Wade there was nothing either new or surprising in the spectacle. He had seen the like in London; and often of late. He had been expecting such a sight – partly from having heard, in passing through Uxbridge, that a troop of horse was before him; and partly from having observed their tracks along the dusty road upon which he had been travelling.

He did not know why they were going down into Buckinghamshire; but that was the king's business, not his. In all likelihood they were on their way to Oxford, or some garrison town in the west; and were making their night halt at the inn.

Giving but a moment's thought to some such conjecture, the young courtier was about riding past – without taking notice of the coarse jests flung towards him by the rough troopers under the tree – when a voice of very different intonation, issuing from the door of the hostelry, commanded him to halt.

Almost simultaneous with the command, two cavaliers stepped forth out of the inn; and one of them, having advanced a few paces towards him, repeated the command.

Partly taken by surprise at this rude summons – and partly believing it to proceed from some old Court acquaintance – Walter drew bridle, and stopped.

It was easy to tell that the two men, who had so brusquely brought themselves under his notice, were the officers in command of the troop. Their silken doublets – only partially concealed by the

steel armour – their elegant Spanish leather boots, with lace ruffles at the tops; the gold spun upon their heels; the white ostrich plumes waving above their helmets; and the richly-chased scabbards of their swords – all indicated rank and authority. This was further made manifest, by the tone of command in which they had spoken, and their bearing in presence of the troopers.

The latter, on seeing them come forth from the house, desisted from their jargon; and, though they continued to pass their beer cans, it was in a constrained and respectful silence.

The two officers wore their helmets; but the visors of both were open; and Walter could see their faces distinctly.

He now perceived that neither of them was known to him; though one of them he thought he had seen before, a few days before – only for a moment, and in conference with the queen!

This was the older of the two, and evidently the senior in rank – the captain of the troop. He was a man of thirty, or thereabouts; with a face of dark complexion, and not unhandsome; but with that rakish expression that drink, and the indulgence of evil passions, will imprint upon the noblest features. His had once been of the noblest – and still were they such that a gentleman need not have been ashamed of – had it not been for a cast half-cynical, half-sinister, that could be detected in his eyes, sadly detracting from a face otherwise well favoured. Altogether it was a countenance of that changing kind, that, smiling, might captivate the heart, but scowling could inspire it with fear.

The younger man – who from the insignia on his shoulder was a *cornet*– presented a very different type of physiognomy. Though still only a youth, his countenance was repulsive in the extreme. There was no need to scan it closely, to arrive at this conclusion. In that reddish round face, shaded by a scant thatch of straight hay-coloured hair, you beheld at a glance a kindred compound of the stupid, the vulgar, and the brutal.

Walter Wade had never looked on that countenance before. It inspired him with no wish to cultivate the acquaintance of its owner. If left to his own inclinations, the young courtier would not have desired ever to look upon it again.

“Your wish?” demanded he, rising proudly up in his stirrups, and confronting the officer who had addressed him. “You have summoned me to stop – your wish?”

“No offence, I hope, young gallant?” replied the cuirassier captain. “None meant, I assure you. By the sweat upon your horse – not a bad-looking brute, by the way. A good nag. Isn’t he, Stubbs?”

“If sound,” laconically rejoined the cornet.

“Oh! sound enough, no doubt, you incorrigible jockey! Well, youngster; as I was saying, the sweat upon your horse proves that you have ridden fast and far. Both you and he stand in need of refreshment. We called to you, merely to offer the hospitality of the inn.”

“Thanks for your kindness,” replied Walter, in a tone that sufficiently expressed his true appreciation of the offer; “but I must decline availing myself of it. *I* am not in need of any refreshment; and as for my horse, a short five miles will bring him to a stable, where he will be well cared for.”

“Oh! you are near the end of your journey, then?”

“By riding five miles further I shall reach it.”

“A visit to some country acquaintance, where you can enjoy the balmy atmosphere of the beech forests – have new-laid eggs every morning for breakfast, and new-pulled turnips along with your bacon for dinner, eh?”

The choler of the high-bred youth had been gradually mounting upward, and might soon have found vent in angry words. But Walter Wade was one of those happy spirits who enjoy a joke – even at their own expense – and, perceiving that his new acquaintances meant no further mischief, than the indulgence in a little idle *badinage*, he repressed his incipient spleen; and replied in the same jocular and satirical strain.

After a sharp passage of words – in which the young courtier was far from being worsted – he was on the point of riding onward; when the captain of the cuirassiers again proffered the hospitality

of the inn – by inviting him to partake of a cup of burnt sack, which the landlord had just brought forth from the house.

The offer was made with an air of studied politeness; and Walter, not caring to appear churlish, accepted it.

He was about raising the goblet to his lips, when his entertainers called for a toast.

"What would you?" asked the young courtier.

"Anything, my gallant! Whatever is uppermost in your mind. Your mistress, I presume?"

"Of course," chimed in the cornet. "His mistress, of course."

"My mistress, then!" said Walter, tasting the wine, and returning the cup to the hand from which he had received it.

"Some pretty shepherdess of the Chilterns – some sweet wood nymph, no doubt? Well, here's to her! And now," continued the officer, without lowering the goblet from his lips, "since I've drunk to your mistress, you'll not refuse the same compliment to my master – the King. You won't object to that toast, will you?"

"By no means," replied Walter, "I drink it willingly; though the king and I have not parted the best of friends."

"Ha! ha! ha! friends with the king! His Majesty has the honour of your acquaintance, eh?"

"I have been nearly three years in his service."

"A courtier?"

"I have been page to the queen."

"Indeed! Perhaps you have no objection to favour us with your name?"

"Not the slightest. My name is Wade – Walter Wade."

"Son of Sir Marmaduke, of Bulstrode Park?"

"I am."

"Ho! ho!" muttered the questioner, in a significant tone, and with a thoughtful glance at the young courtier.

"I thought so," stammered the cornet, exchanging a look of intelligence with his superior officer.

"Son to Sir Marmaduke, indeed!" continued the latter, "In that case, Master Wade, we are likely to meet again; and perhaps you will some day favour me with an introduction to your sweet shepherdess. Ha! ha! ha! Now for the toast of every true Englishman – 'The King!'"

Walter responded; though with no great willingness: for the tone of the challenger, as well as his words, had produced upon him an unpleasant impression. But the toast was one, that, at the time, it was not safe to decline drinking; and partly on this account, and partly because the young courtier had no particular reason for declining, he raised the goblet once more to his lips, as he did so, repeating the Words – "to the king."

The cornet, drinking from a cup of his own, echoed the sentiment; and the troopers under the tree, clinking their beer measures together, vociferated in loud acclaim: – "the king – the king!"

Volume One – Chapter Seven

After this general declaration of loyalty, there was a lull – an interval of profound silence – such as usually succeeds the drinking of a toast.

The silence was unexpectedly broken, by a voice that had not yet mingled in the chorus; and which was now heard in clear, firm tones, pronouncing a phrase of very different signification: – "the people!"

A sentiment so antagonistic to the one so late issuing from the lips of the troopers, produced among them an instantaneous commotion. The soldiers, seated under the tree, started to their feet; while the officers faced in the direction whence the voice had come – their eyes angrily flashing under the umbrils of their helmets.

He, who had so daringly declared himself, was not concealed. A horseman, of elegant appearance, had just ridden up, and halted in the middle of the road; where the landlord – apparently without orders, and as if accustomed to the service, – was helping him to a goblet of wine. It was this horseman who had called out: "The People!"

In the enthusiasm of their loyalty, his arrival had either not been observed by the troopers, – or at all events no notice had been taken of it, – until the emphatic pronunciation fell upon their ears like the bursting of a bomb. Then all eyes were instantly turned towards him.

As he gave utterance to the phrase, he was in the act of raising the wine cup to his lips. Without appearing to notice the effect which his speech had produced, he coolly quaffed off the wine; and with like *sang froid*, returned the empty goblet to the giver.

The defiant insolence of the act had so taken the troopers by surprise, that they stood in their places – just as they had started up – silent, and apparently stupefied. Even the officers, after hurrying forward, remained speechless for several seconds – as if under the influence of an angry amazement. The only sounds for a while heard were the voices of the spectators – tapsters, stable-helpers, and other idlers – who had clustered in front of the inn – and who now formed an assemblage, as large as the troop itself. Despite the presence of the armed representatives of royalty, the sentiment of these was unmistakeably the same, as that to which the strange horseman had given voice; and they were emphatically complimenting *themselves*, when they clinked their pewter pots, and in chorus, proclaimed: "The People!"

Most of them, but the moment before, and with equal enthusiasm, had drunk "the King;" but in this sudden change of sentiment they only resembled most politicians of modern times, who have been dignified with the name of "Statesmen!"

But even among these tapsters and stable-helpers, there were some who had refrained from being forced into a lip loyalty; and who echoed the second sentiment with a fervent spirit, and a full knowledge of its everlasting antagonism to the first.

When the ultimate syllable of this sacred phrase had died upon the ear of the assembled crowd, it was succeeded by a silence ominous and expectant. Two individuals commanded the attention of all – the captain of the cuirassiers, and the horseman who had halted upon the road: the toaster of the "king," and the proposer of the "people."

The soldier should speak first. It was to him that the challenge – if such he chose to consider it – had been flung forth.

Had it been a rustic who had uttered it – one of the assembled crowd – even a freehold farmer of puritanic pretensions – the cuirassier captain would have answered him on the instant, perhaps with steel added to the persuasion of his tongue. But a cavalier, of broad bands, and gold spurs buckled over Spanish leather boots – astride a noble steed – with a long rapier hanging handy anent his hip – was an individual not to be ridden over in such haste, and one, whose "argument" called for consideration.

"Zounds, sir!" cried the captain of the cuirassiers, stepping a pace or two forward, "from what Bedlam have you broken loose? Me thinks you've been tasting too freely of the Saint Giles's tap; and 'tis that which makes your speech smell so rankly. Come, fellow! Uncover your head, and tune your tongue to a different strain. You go not hence, till you've purged your traitorous throat by drinking the toast of every true and loyal gentleman of England – 'The King.'"

"Fellow, indeed!" exclaimed the cavalier, looking scornfully askance at him who had dictated the insulting proposition. "A fellow!" he continued, in a calm but satirical tone, "not in the habit of drinking toasts with strangers. Yours is not to his liking, any more than your fashion. If he had the fancy to drink to England's king, it would not be in the company of those who have disgraced England's fame – at the ford of Newburn."

Gathering up his reins as he spoke, and giving utterance to a taunting laugh, the strange horseman pressed the spur against the sides of his splendid steed, and started off at a swinging gallop along the road.

It was only when that laugh rang in his ears, that the cuirassier captain became roused to the full frenzy of rage; and, with eyes on fire, and brow black as midnight, he rushed forward, sword in hand, in a frantic attempt to strike down the insulter.

"Disloyal knave!" cried he, lungeing out to the full length of his arm, "thou shalt drink the king's health in thine own blood! Ha! stop him!" he continued, as the horseman glided beyond his reach – "My pistols!"

"Ho, there!" shouted he to his followers. "Your carbines! Fire upon him! Where are your weapons, you careless vagabonds? To horse, and follow!"

"An ye take my advice, masters," put in the landlord of the inn – a sturdy tapster of independent speech – "ye'll stay wheer ye are. An ye doan't, ye'll be havin' yeer ride for nothin'. Ye mawt as well gie chase to a wild goose. He'll be two mile frae this, 'fore you can git astride o' your nags."

"What, varlet!" cried the cuirassier captain, turning furiously upon the speaker – "you presume – "

"Only, great coronel, to gie ye a bit o' sound advice. Ye ma' folla it or no' an' ye pleeze; but if ye folla him ye won't catch him – not this night, I trow, though theer *be* a full moon to light ye on his track."

The air of imperturbable coolness, with which the Saxon Boniface made rejoinder, instead of increasing the fury of the officer, seemed rather to have the effect of tranquillising him.

"You know him, then?" demanded he in an altered tone.

"Well, e-e's! a leetlish bit only. He be one o' my customers, and have his drink occasional as he passes by here. I know his horse a bit better mayhap. That be a anymal worth the knowin'. I've seed him clear that geeat – it be six-feet-high – moren once, wee've seed him do it. Ha'nt we, lads?"

"That we have, Master Jarvis," replied several of the bystanders, to whom the appeal had been made.

"E-ees, indeed, great coronel," continued the landlord, once more addressing his speech to the captain of cuirassiers, "an' if yer fellows want to folla him, they maun be up to ridin' cross country a bit, or else – "

"His name!" eagerly interrupted the officer, "You know where the knave lives?"

"Not exactly – neyther one nor t'other," was the equivocal reply. "As for his name, we only knows him 'bout here as the *Black Horseman*, an' that he belong som'ere among the hills up the Jarret's Heath way – beyond the great park o' Bulstrode."

"Oh! he lives near Bulstrode, does he?"

"Somer bot theer, I dar say."

"*I* know where he lives," interposed one of the rustics who stood by. "It be a queery sort o' a place – a old red brick house; an' Stone Dean be the name o't. It lie in the middle o' the woods 'tween Beckenfield an' the two Chaffonts. I can take ye theer, master officer, if ye be a wantin' to go."

"Jem Biggs!" said the landlord, sidling up to the last speaker, and whispering the words in his ear, "thee be a meddlin' 'ficious beggar. If thee go on such a errand, don't never again show thy ugly mug in my tap room."

"Enough!" impatiently exclaimed the officer; "I dare say we shall easily find the fellow. Dismount, men," continued he, turning to some of the troopers, who had sprung into their saddles. "Return your horses to their stalls. We may as well stay here for the night," he added in a whisper, to his cornet; "it's no use going after him till the morning. As the old prattler says, we might have our ride for nothing. Besides, there's that little appointment in Uxbridge. By the angel Gabriel! I'll find the knave if I should have to scour every corner of the county. More wine, landlord! – burnt sack! – and beer for these thirsty vagabonds! We'll drink the king once more, with three times three. Ha! where's our courtier? Gone too?"

"He's just ridden off, captain," answered one of the troopers, still seated in his saddle. "Shall I gallop after, and bring him back?"

"No," replied the officer, after a moment's consideration. "Let the stripling go his way. I know where *he's* to be found; and shall do myself the honour of dining with him to-morrow. The wine! Come! fill your cans, you right royal rascals, and drink —*The King*!"

"*The King! Hurraw*!"

Volume One – Chapter Eight

Desirous of escaping from the disagreeable companionship – into which he had been so unceremoniously, as well as unwillingly, drawn – the young courtier had taken advantage of the confusion, and trotted quietly away.

On rounding a corner – beyond which the road was not visible from the inn – he put spurs to his horse, and urged the animal into a gallop.

Though he had given no offence, he was not without apprehension, that he might be followed, and summoned back: for the brace of bullies, from whom he had just parted, appeared quite capable of committing further outrage. He knew that, in the name of the king, excesses were of every-day occurrence. The Monarch's minions had become accustomed to insult the people with impunity. The soldiers in particular bore themselves offensively – more especially those hungry troopers, who, returning unpaid from the Northern campaign, were thrown idle upon the country. The disgrace they had fairly earned – by fleeing before the Scots, from the ford of Newburn – had deprived them of the sympathies of their own countrymen: as a natural consequence provoking towards the latter a sort of swaggering and reckless hostility.

The incident which had occurred, and in which he had been an involuntary actor, inspired Walter Wade with some emotions that were new to him: and, as he slackened his pace, after a sharp canter, he fell into a train of reflections very different from those hitherto engaging his thoughts.

He was still too young to have entered into the politics of the time. He knew that there was trouble between the king and his people; but, breathing only the atmosphere of the "Presence," he could have no other belief, than that the right was on the side of royalty.

He knew that the king, after an interregnum of eleven years, had summoned a Parliament, to settle the differences between himself and his subjects. He knew this, from having been officially present at its opening. He knew, moreover, that this Parliament, after sitting only a few days, had been summarily dismissed: for he had been also present at its prorogation.

What should the young courtier care for such incidents as these – however significant they might be to the patriot, or politician?

To do him justice, however, Walter Wade, young as he was, was not altogether indifferent to what was passing. The spirit of his ancestry – that love of liberty, that had displayed itself at Runnymede – was not absent from his bosom. It was there; though hitherto held in check by the circumstances surrounding him. He had witnessed the punishments of the pillory – by summary sentence of Star Chamber and High Commission Court; he had been present at fearful spectacles, of ear-croppings and other mutilations; and, although among companions, who beheld such scenes with indifference – or often regarded them as sources of amusement – more than once had he been profoundly affected by them. Stripling though he was, more than once had he reflected upon such royal wrongs. Circumstances, however, had placed him among the ranks of those, to whom the smiles of a tyrant were sweet; and he was still too young and unreflecting, to give other than a passing thought to the theme of Liberty.

That the enemies of the king suffered justly, was the belief that was breathed around him. He heard the statement on all sides, and from pretty lips – from the lips of a queen! How could he question its truth?

His encounter with the cuirassiers had produced an impression upon him, calculated to shake his political sentiments – almost to change them.

"A scandal!" muttered he to himself. "That these military bullies should be allowed to act as they please! I wonder the king permits it. Perhaps it may be true what 'wicked Pym,' as the queen calls him – said in the Parliament House: – that his Majesty encourages their insubordination. Ah! if I had thought so, I should have joined that brave fellow, who drank just now to *the people*. By-the-bye,

who can *he* be? He's gone up the road – as if he lived our way. A splendid rider, and a horse worthy of him. I never saw either before. If he be of Bulstrode neighbourhood, he must have come into it since my time. Perhaps a traveller only? And yet his horse looked fresh, as if he had just stepped out of the stable. He could not have ridden him farther than from Uxbridge?

"I thought those fellows were preparing to pursue him," continued he, glancing back over his shoulder. "They must have given up the idea: else I should hear them behind me. If they come on, I shall slip aside among the trees, and let them pass. I don't want any more converse with such companions as Captain Scarthe – that's what his cornet called him, I think; nor yet with Master Cornet Stubbs himself. Stubbs indeed! Surely, there must be something in names?"

On finishing this series of reflections, the young courtier drew bridle, and halted for the purpose of listening.

He could hear voices behind – at the inn – a chorus of rough voices in loud vociferation. It was the "hip hurrah," of the troopers responding to the toast of "*the king*" There were no other sounds – at least none to indicate that the pursuit was being continued.

"Good! they are not following him. Prudent on their part, I should say. If he has kept on, as he started he will be miles off by this."

"There's no chance of my overtaking him!" continued he, once more heading his horse to the road. "My faith! I wish I could. Now that I remember the circumstance, I've heard there are robbers on this route. Sister wrote me about them, not long since. They stopped a lady's coach, and plundered it; though they did no hurt to the lady beyond stripping her of her jewels – even to the rings in her ears! Only one of them – the captain I suppose – came near the coach. The others stood by, but said not a word. How very funny of the fellows to act so! Well, if it be my ill-fortune to encounter robbers, I hope it may also be my good fortune to find them equally well-mannered. I don't mind giving them all I've got, – it's not much – if they'll only let me pass on, unmolested like the lady. I'faith, I've been a fool to leave London so late: and that unlucky adventure at the inn has made it later. It's quite right. There's a beautiful moon, to be sure; but what of that, in this lonely place? It would only help to give light to the rascals; and enable them all the more easily to strip me of my trappings."

Notwithstanding his apparent indifference to an encounter with robbers, which these reflections might indicate, the young traveller was not without some apprehension. At the time, the roads of England were infested with highwaymen, and footpads. Robberies were incidents of daily occurrence – even on the very skirts of the metropolis; and on the highways, and byeways, the demand for your purse was almost as common as the modern solicitation for alms.

In general, the "gentlemen of the road" were not sanguinary in their disposition. Some were even courteous. In truth, many of them were men who, by the tyrannous exactions of the Sovereign, had been beggared in fortune, and forced to adopt this illegal mode of replenishing their exchequers. They were not all ruffians by instinct. Still there were some of them, with whom "Stand and deliver!" meant "Death if you do not!"

It was not without a feeling of nervousness, that Walter Wade scanned the long slope of road extending towards the crest of Red Hill – at the bottom of which he had now arrived. It was on this very hill – as stated in the correspondence of his sister – that the coach had been stopped, and the lady rifled of her rings.

The road running up the steep acclivity was of no great width – nothing resembling the broad macadamised "turnpike" of modern times. It was a mere track, just wide enough for wheels – bordered by a beechen forest, through which the path wound upward; the trees standing close along each side, and in some places forming arcades over it.

The young traveller once more reined up, and listened. The voices from the inn no longer reached his ear – not even in distant murmuring. He would have preferred hearing them. He almost wished that the pursuit had been continued. Little as he might have relished the companionship of

Captain Scarthe, or Cornet Stubbs, it would have been preferable to falling into that of a party of highwaymen or footpads.

He bent forward to catch any sound that might come from the road before him. He could hear none – at least, none of a character to make him uneasy. The soft monotone of the goatsucker fell upon his ear, mingled with the sharper note of the partridge, calling her young across the stubble. He heard, also, the distant barking of the watch-dog, and the sheep-bell tinkling in the fold; but these sounds, though characteristic of tranquil country life – and sweet to his ear, so long hindered from hearing them – were not inconsistent with the presence either of footpad or highwayman; who, lurking concealed among the trees, need not interrupt their utterance.

Walter Wade was far from being of a timid disposition; but no youth of eighteen could be accused of cowardice, simply because he did not desire an encounter with robbers.

It did not, therefore, prove poltroonery on his part, when, proceeding along the road, his heart beat slightly with apprehension, – no more, when on perceiving the figure of a horseman dimly outlined under the shadow of the trees, he suddenly came to a halt, and hesitated to advance.

The horseman was about a score of paces from where he had stopped – moving neither one way nor the other, but motionless in the middle of the road.

"A highwayman!" thought Walter, undecided whether to advance, or ride back.

"But no, it can scarce be that? A robber would not take stand so conspicuously. He would be more likely to conceal himself behind the trees – at least until – "

While thus conjecturing, a voice fell upon his ear, which he at once recognised as the same he had late heard so emphatically pronouncing "*The People*!"

Reassured, the young traveller determined to advance. A man of such mien, as he who bestrode the black steed – and actuated by such a sentiment, as that he had so boldly announced – could scarcely be a disreputable person – much less a highwayman? Walter did not wrong him by the suspicion.

"If I mistake not," said the stranger, after the preliminary hail, "you are the young gentleman I saw, a short while ago, in rather scurvy company?"

"You are not mistaken: I am."

"Come on, then! If you are my only pursuer, I fancy I shall incur no danger, in permitting you to overtake me? Come on, young sir! Perhaps on these roads it may be safer for both of us, if we ride in company?"

Thus frankly solicited, the young courtier hesitated no longer; but, pricking his horse with the spur, rode briskly forward.

Together the horsemen continued the ascent of the hill.

Half way up, the road swerved towards the south-west. For a short distance the track was clear of trees, so that the moonlight fell full upon it. Here the two travellers, for the first time, obtained a distinct view of one another.

The stranger – who still retained his *incognito*– merely glanced towards his companion; and, seemingly satisfied with a slight inspection, allowed his eyes to wander elsewhere.

Perhaps during his halt before the hostelry, he had made a more elaborate examination of the young courtier.

Walter, on the other hand, had at the Inn caught only a glimpse of the black horseman. Now, though out of courtesy, looking furtively and askaunce, he proceeded to examine him more minutely.

The personal appearance of the latter was striking enough to court examination. Walter Wade was impressed with it – even to admiration.

He saw beside him, not a youth like himself, but a man in the full prime and vigour of manhood – perhaps over thirty years of age. He saw a figure of medium size, and perfect shape – its members knitted together, with a terseness that indicated true strength. He saw shoulders of elegant *tuornure*; a breast of swelling prominence; a full round throat, with jaws that by their breadth proclaimed firmness and decision. He saw dark brown hair, curling around a countenance, that in youth might

have appeared under a fairer complexion, but was now slightly bronzed, as if stained with the tan of travel. He saw eyes of dark hazel hue – in the moonlight shining softly and mildly as those of a dove. But Walter knew that those same eyes could flash like an eagle's: for he had seen them so fired, on first beholding them.

In short the young courtier saw by his side a man that reminded him of a hero of Middle Age romance – one about whom he had been lately reading; and whose character had made a deep impression upon his youthful fancy.

The dress of the cavalier was in perfect keeping with his fine figure and face. It was simple, although of costly material. Cloak, doublet, and trunks were of silk velvet of dark maroon colour. The boots were of the finest Spanish leather, and his hat a beaver – the brim in clasp coquettishly turned up, with a jewelled front holding a black ostrich feather that swept backward to his shoulder. A scarlet sash of China crape, looped around the waist – an embroidered shoulder-belt crossing the breast, from which dangled a rapier in richly-chased sheath; buff-coloured gloves, with gauntlets attached; cuffs of white lawn covering the sleeves of his doublet; and broad collar of the same extending almost to his shoulders. Fancy all these articles of costly fabric, fitted in the fashion of the time to a faultless manly figure, and you have a portrait of the cavalier whose appearance had won the admiration of Walter Wade.

The horse was in keeping with the rider – a steed of large size and perfect proportions – such as an ancient paladin might have chosen to carry him upon a crusade. He was of the true colour – a deep pure black, all except his muzzle where the velvet-like epidermis was tinged with yellowish red, presenting the hue of umber. Had his tail been suffered to droop, its tip would have touched the ground; but even while going into a walk it swung diagonally outward, oscillating at each step. When in the gallop, it floated upon the air spread and horizontal.

The spotted skin of a South American jaguar, with housings of scarlet cloth, caparisoned the saddle; over the pommel of which hung a pair of holsters, screened by the thick glossy fur of the North American beaver.

The bit was a powerful mameluke – about that time introduced from the Spanish peninsula – which, clanking between the teeth of the horse, constantly kept his mouth in a state of foam.

This beautiful steed had a name. Walter had heard it pronounced. As the young courtier rode up, the horse was standing – his muzzle almost in contact with the road – and pawing the dust with impatience. The short gallop had roused his fiery spirit. To tranquillise it, his rider was caressing him – as he drew his gloved hand over the smooth skin of the neck, talking to him, as if he had been a comrade, and repeating his name. It was "Hubert."

After exchanging salutations, the two horse men rode side by side for some moments, without vouchsafing further speech. It was the silence consequent upon such an informal introduction. The rider of the black steed was the first to break it.

"You are Walter Wade – son to Sir Marmaduke, of Bulstrode Park?" said he, less by way of interrogative, than as a means of commencing the conversation.

"I am," answered the young courtier, showing some surprise. "How learnt you my name, sir?"

"From your own lips."

"From my own lips! When, may I ask?" inquired Walter, with a fresh scrutiny of the stranger's countenance. "I don't remember having had the honour of meeting you before."

"Only within the last half-hour. You forget, young sir, having given your name in my hearing?"

"Oh! true – you overheard then – you were present – ?"

"I rode up just as you were declaring your identity. The son of Sir Marmaduke Wade has no need to conceal his name. It is one to be proud of."

"In my father's name I thank you. You know him, sir?"

"Only by sight and —*reputation*," answered the stranger, musingly. "You are in the service of the Court?" he continued, after a pause.

"No longer now. I took leave of it this very morning."

"Resigned?"

"It was my father's wish I should return home."

"Indeed! And for what reason? Pardon my freedom in asking the question."

"Oh!" replied the young courtier, with an air of *naïveté*, "I should make you free to the reason, if I only knew it myself. But in truth, sir, I am ignorant of it. I only know that my father has written to the king, asking permission for me to return home; that the king has granted it – though, I have reason to think, with an ill grace: since his Majesty appeared angry with me at parting; or, perhaps, I should say, angry with my father."

The intelligence thus communicated by the *ci-devant* courtier, instead of eliciting any expression of regret from his companion, seemed rather to gratify him.

"So far good!" muttered he to himself. "Safe upon our side. This, will secure him."

Walter partially overheard the soliloquised phrases, but without comprehending their import.

"Your father," continued the stranger, "is likely to have good reasons for what he has done. No doubt, Master Walter, he has acted for your best interests; though it may be rather unpleasant for you, to exchange the gay pleasures of a royal palace for a quiet life in the country."

"On the contrary," replied the youth, "it is just what I was desiring. I am fond of hawking and hunting; not in the grand ceremonious fashion we've been accustomed to at Court – with a crowd of squalling women to fright away the game – but by myself on the quiet, among the hills here, or with a friend or two to take part. That's the sport for me!"

"Indeed!" said the strange horseman, smiling as he spoke. "These are heterodox sentiments for a courtier? It's rather odd to hear one of your calling speak disparagingly of the sex, and especially the ladies of the Court. The maids of honour are very interesting, are they not? I have understood that our French queen affects being surrounded by beauties. She has a long train of them, it is said?"

"Painted dolls!" scornfully rejoined the ex-courtier, "tricked in French fashions. Give me a genuine English girl – above all one who keeps to the country, and's got some colour. And some conscience besides; for, by my troth, sir, there's not much of either about the Court – except what's artificial!"

"Bravo!" exclaimed the stranger, "a Court satirist, rather than a courtier. Well! I'm glad to hear my own sentiments so eloquently expressed. Give me also the genuine English girl who breathes only the pure air of the country!"

"That's the style for me!" echoed Walter in the warmth of youthful enthusiasm.

"Well! there are many such to be met with among these Chiltern Hills. No doubt, Master Wade, you know some; and perhaps you have one in particular before your mind's eye at this very moment? Ha! ha! ha!"

The colour came to Walter's cheeks as he stammered out a reply, which only partially repudiated the insinuation.

"Your pardon!" cried the cavalier, suddenly checking his laughter. "I don't wish to confess you. I have no right to do so. I have given you reason to think me unmannerly."

"Oh! not at all," said Walter, himself too free of speech to be offended by that quality in another.

"Perhaps you will excuse the curiosity of a stranger," continued the black horseman. "I have been only a short time resident in this part of the country; and one is naturally curious to know something of one's neighbours. If you promise not to be offended, I shall make bold to ask you another question."

"I shall not be offended at any question one gentleman may ask of another. You are a gentleman, sir?"

"I have been brought up as one; and, though I have parted with, or rather been deprived of, the fortune that attaches to such a title, I hope I have not forfeited the character. The question I am about

to put, may appear rather trivial after so elaborate an introduction. I merely wished to ask, whether you are the only member of your father's family?"

"Oh! dear no," frankly responded the youth; "I have a sister – sister Marion."

"Grown up, like yourself?"

"She should be by this. She wasn't quite grown, when I saw her last; but that will be three years come Christmas. She's older than I; and, i'faith I shouldn't wonder if she be taller too. I've heard say she's a great, big girl – nearly the head taller than Lora."

"Lora?"

"Lora Lovelace – my cousin, sir."

"'Tis his sister – 'tis Marion. I thought as much. Marion Wade! A noble name. It has a bold clarion sound – in keeping with the character of her who bears it. Marion! Now know I the name of her who for weeks I have been worshipping! Who for weeks – "

"My cousin," continued the candid young courtier, interrupting the silent reflections of his travelling companion, "is also a member of my father's family. She has been staying at Bulstrode Park now for many years; and will remain, I suppose, until – "

The heir of Bulstrode hesitated – as if not very certain of the time at which the stay of his cousin was to terminate.

"Until," interrogated the cavalier, with a significant smile, "until when?"

"Really, sir," said Walter, speaking rather confusedly, "I can't say how long our cousin may choose to remain with us. When she comes to be of age, I dare say, her guardian will claim her. Papa is *not* her guardian."

"Ah! Master Walter Wade, I'd lay a wager, that before Mistress Lora Lovelace be of age, she'll choose her own guardian – one who will not object to her staying at Bulstrode for the remainder of her life. Ha! ha! ha!"

Instead of feeling indignant, the cousin of Lora Lovelace joined in the laugh. There was something in the insinuation that soothed and gratified him.

Conversing in this jocular vein, the two travellers reached the summit of the sloping declivity; and, continuing onward, entered upon a wild tract of country known as *Jarret's Heath*.

Volume One – Chapter Nine

Jarret's Heath – now Gerrard's Cross Common – was at the time of which we write, a tract of considerable extent – occupying an elevated *plateau* of the Chiltern Hills, and one of the largest. Commencing at the brow of Red Hill, it extended westward for a distance of many miles – flanked right and left by the romantic valleys of Chalfont and Fulmere.

At that time only the adjoining valleys showed signs of habitation. In the former stood the noble mansion of Chalfont House, with its synonymous village; while on the other side, quaintly embowered amid ancient trees, was the manorial residence of Fulmere. About two miles farther to the westward, where the plateau is broken by a series of rounded indications, stood the magnificent mansion of Temple Bulstrode, the residence of Sir Marmaduke Wade.

The elevated plain, lying between the above-named lordships, bore scarce a trace of human occupancy. It's name, Jarret's Heath, would indicate the condition of its culture. It was a waste – upon which the plough had never broken ground – thickly covered with high gorse and heather. Here and there appeared straggling groves and copses, composed chiefly of black and white birch trees, interspersed with juniper and holly; while on each side towards the valleys, it was flanked by a dense forest of the indigenous beech.

Lengthwise through this waste trended the King's highway – the London and Oxford road – beyond it impinging upon the Park of Bulstrode, and running alongside the latter towards the town of Beaconsfield.

In the traverse of Jarret's Heath the main road was intersected by two others – one passing from the manor house of Fulmere to the village of Chalfont Saint Peter's: the other forming the communication between Chalfont and the country towards Stoke and Windsor. These were but bridle or *packhorse* paths, tracked out irregularly among the trees, and meandering through the gorse wherever it grew thinnest. That running from Stoke to Chalfont was the most frequented; and an old inn – the *Packhorse*– standing upon the Chalfont side of the waste, betokened traffic and travel. There was not much of either; and the hostelry bore only a questionable character.

Such as it was, however, it was the only sign of habitation upon Jarret's Heath – if we except the remains of a rude hovel, standing by the side of the London road, just at the point where going westward from Red Hill, it debouched upon the waste.

This hovel had been long untenanted. Part of the roof had fallen in: it was a ruin. An open space in front, through which ran the road, might once have been a garden; but it was now overgrown with gorse, and other indigenous shrubbery – only distinguishable from the surrounding thicket by its scantier growth.

It was a singular spot to have been selected as a residence: since it stood more than a mile from any other habitation – the nearest being the suspected hostelry of the Packhorse. Perhaps it was this very remoteness from companionship that had influenced its original owner in the choice of a site for his dwelling.

Whether or no, it had been at best but a miserable tenement. Even with smoke issuing out of its clay chimney, it would have looked cheerless. But in ruins, with its roof falling piecemeal upon the floor, tall weeds standing close by its walls, gorse overgrowing its garden, and black birches clustering thickly around, it presented an aspect of wild and gloomy desolation: the very spot where one might expect to be robbed, or even murdered.

Conversing as we have described them, the two travellers had arrived near the edge of the opening in which stood this ruined hut. The moon was still shining brightly; and through the break in the brushwood, formed by the cleared causeway of the road, they could distinguish – though still at the distance of a mile or more – the tops of the magnificent trees, oaks, elms, and chestnuts, that

crowned the undulating ridges of Bulstrode Park. They could even see a portion of the noble mansion of Norman architecture, gleaming red and white under the silvery sheen of the moonlight.

In ten minutes more Walter Wade would be at home.

It was a pleasant anticipation for the young courtier to indulge in. Home so near, after such a long protracted absence – home, that promised the sweet interchange of natural affection, and – something more.

The cavalier – whose journey extended farther up the road – was about congratulating his companion on the delightful prospect; when a rustling noise, heard to the right of the path suddenly stopped their conversation. At the same instant a harsh voice, sounded in their ears, pronouncing the significant summons: – "stand and deliver!"

The two travellers had already ridden into the open ground, in front of the ruined hut, out of which the voice appeared to proceed. But they had no time to speculate as to whence it came: for on the instant of its utterance, a man was seen rushing forward into the middle of the road, and placing himself in a position to intercept their advance.

His threatening attitude, combined with the mode in which he manipulated a long-handled pike – the point of which he held close to the heads of their horses – left no doubt upon the minds of the travellers that to stop them was his determination.

Before either could make reply to his challenge, it was repronounced in the same loud tone, and with a fresh gesture of menace – in which the pike played an important part.

"Stand and deliver?" interrogated the cavalier, slowly repeating the stereotyped phrase. "That's your wish, is it, my worthy fellow?"

"It is!" growled the challenger, "an' be quickish, if ye've any consarn for yer skins."

"Well," continued the cavalier, preserving the most perfect *sang froid*, "you can't say but that we've been quick enough in obeying your first command? You see we have both come to a stand *instanter*? As for your second, it requires consideration. Before *delivering*, we must know the why, and the wherefore – above all, to whom we are to unburthen ourselves. You won't object, to obliging us with your name – as also your reason for making such a modest request?"

"Curse your palaver?" vociferated the man, with an impatient flourish of the pike. "There be no names given on the road, nor reasons neyther. Yer money, or yer blood! It be no use yer tryin' to get out o' it. Look thear! Ye see there be a dozen o' us! What's the good o' resistin'? Ye're surrounded."

And as he said this, the robber with a sweep of his formidable weapon indicated the circle of shrubbery – near the centre of which the scene was being enacted.

The eyes of the two travellers involuntarily followed the pointing of the pike.

Sure enough they *were* surrounded. Six or seven fierce-looking men, all apparently armed with the same sort of weapon as that in the hands of their leader, stood at equal distances from each other around the opening – their forms half concealed by the trees and gorse. They were all standing perfectly motionless. Not even their weapons seemed to stir; and not one of them had as yet spoken, or stepped forward; though it might have been expected they would have done so – if only to strengthen the demand made by their spokesman.

"Keep your places, comrades!" commanded the latter. "There's no need for any o' ye to stir. These are civilish gentlemen. We don't want to hurt them. They bean't a-goin' to resist."

"But they *be*" interrupted the cavalier, in a mocking but determined tone, at the same time whipping a pistol from its holster – "*I am* to the death; and so too will the gallant youth by my side."

Walter had drawn his slender rapier – the only weapon he possessed.

"What! yield to a pack of cowardly footpads?" continued the cavalier, cocking his pistol, as he spoke. "No – sooner – "

"Your blood on your own head then!" shouted the robber, at the same time rushing forward, and extending his pike so that its steel point was almost in contact with the counter of the cavalier's horse.

The moonlight shone full upon the footpad, showing a face of fierce aspect – features of wild expression – black beard and whiskers – a thick shock of dark hair matted and tangled – eyes bloodshot, and gleaming with a lurid light!

It was fortunate for their owner, that the moonlight favoured the identification of those fear-inspiring features – else that moment might have been his last.

The cavalier had levelled his cocked pistol. His finger was upon the trigger. In another second the shot would have been discharged; and in all likelihood his assailant would have been lying lifeless at the feet of his horse.

All at once, the outstretched arm was seen to drop; while at the same instant from the horseman's lips issued an exclamation of singular import.

"Gregory Garth!" cried he, "you a highwayman – a robber? About to rob – to murder – "

"My old master!" gasped out the man, suddenly lowering the point of his pike. "Be it you? Pardon! O pardon, Sir Henry! I didn't know 'twas you."

And as the speaker gave utterance to the last words, he dashed his weapon to the ground, and stood over it in a cowering and contrite attitude – not daring to raise his eyes to the face of him who had brought the affair to such an unexpected ending.

"O Master Henry!" he again cried, "will you forgive me! Brute as I am, 'twould ha' broke my heart to a hurted a hair o' your head. Curse the crooked luck that's brought me to this!"

For some moments there was a profound silence – unbroken by any voice. Even the companions of the robber appeared to respect the *situation*: since not one of them moved or made remark of any kind!

Their humiliated chief was himself the first to put a period to this interval of embarrassment.

"O Master Henry!" he exclaimed, apparently in a paroxysm of chagrin. "Shoot me! Kill me if ye like! After what's passed, I doan't desarve no better than to die. There's my breast! Send yer bullet through it; an' put an end to the miserable life o' Greg'ry Garth!"

While speaking, the footpad pulled open the flap of his doublet – laying bare before the moonlight a broad sinewy breast, thickly covered with coarse black hair.

Advancing close to the cavalier's horse he presented his bosom, thus exposed – as if to tempt the death he had so strangely solicited. His words, his looks, his whole attitude, proclaimed him to be in earnest.

"Come, come, Garth!" said the cavalier in a soothing tone – at the same time returning the pistol to its holster. "You're too good a man – at least you *were once*– to be shot down in that off-hand fashion."

"Ah! *once* Master Henry. May be that's true enough. But now I desarve it."

"Spare your self-recrimination, Gregory. Your life, like my own, has been a hard one. I know it; and can therefore look more leniently on what has happened now. Let us be thankful it's no worse; and hope it will be the means of bringing about a change for the better."

"It will, Master Henry; it will! I promise that."

"I'm glad to hear you say so; and doubt not but that you'll keep your word. Meanwhile give orders to your trusty followers – by the way a well-behaved band – not to molest us. To-morrow morning there will be travellers along this way, upon whom I have not the slightest objection that both you and yours should practise your peculiar avocation; and to your heart's content. Please desire those gentlemen to keep their distance. I don't wish them to make any nearer approach – lest I might have the misfortune to find in their ranks some other old acquaintance, who like yourself has fallen from the paths of virtue."

As the footpad stood listening to the request, a singular expression was observed to steal over his fierce features – which gradually gathered into a broad comical grin.

"Ah! Master Henry," he rejoined, "I may order 'em, to obleege ye, but they woant obey. Yer needn't be afeerd o' 'em for all that. You may go as near 'em as you like —*they* an't a-goin' to molest

you. You may run your sword through and through 'em, and never a one o' 'em's goin' to cry out he be hurt."

"Well, they seem patient fellows in all sincerity. But enough – what do you mean, Gregory?"

"That they be nobodies, Master Henry – reg'lar nobodies. They be only dummies – a lot o' old coats and hats, that's no doubt done good sarvice to their wearers 'fore they fell into the hands o' Gregory Garth – ay, and they ha' done some good sarvice since – o' a different kind, as ye see."

"So these fellows are only scarecrows? I had my suspicions."

"Nothing more nor less, master. Harmless as I once was myself, but since that time – you know – when the old hall was taken from you, and you went abroad – since then I've been – "

"I don't want to hear your history, Garth," said his former Master, interrupting him, "at least not *since then*. Let the past be of the past, if you will only promise me to forsake your present profession for the future. Sooner or later it will bring you to the block."

"But what am I to do?" inquired the footpad, in a tone of humble expostulation.

"Do? Anything but what you have been doing. Get work – honest work."

"As I live, I've tried wi' all my might. Ah! Sir Henry, you've been away from the country a tidyish time. You don't know how things be now. To be honest be to starve. Honesty an't no longer o' any account in England."

"Some day," said the cavalier, as he sate reflecting in his saddle. "Some day it may be more valued – and that day not distant Gregory Garth!" he continued, making appeal to the footpad in a more serious and earnest tone of voice, "You have a bold heart, and a strong arm. I know it. I have no doubt too, that despite the outlawed life you've been leading, *your sympathies are still on the right side*. They have reason: for you too have suffered in your way. You know what I mean?"

"I do, Sir Henry, I do," eagerly answered the man. "Ye're right. Brute as I may be, and robber as I ha' been, I ha' my inclining in that ere. Ah! it's it that's made me what I be!"

"Hear me then," said the cavalier bending down in his saddle, and speaking still more confidentially. "The time is not distant – perhaps nearer than most people think – when a stout heart and a strong arm – such as yours, Garth, – may be usefully employed in a better occupation, than that you've been following."

"Dy'e say so, Sir Henry?"

"I do. So take my advice. Disband these trusty followers of yours – whose *staunchness* ought to recommend them for better service. Make the best market you can of their cast-off wardrobes. Retire for a time into private life; and wait till you hear shouted those sacred words —

"God and the People!"

"Bless ye, Sir Henry!" cried the robber, rushing up, and, with a show of rude affection, clutching the hand of his former master. "I had heard o' your comin' to live at the old house in the forest up thear; but I didn't expect to meet you in this way. You'll let me come an' see ye. I promise ye that ye'll never meet me as a robber again. *This night Gregory Garth takes his leave o' the road*."

"A good resolve!" rejoined the cavalier, warmly returning the pressure of the outlaw's hand. "I'm glad you have made it. Good-night, Gregory!" he continued, moving onward along the road; "Come and see me, whenever you please. Good-night, gentlemen!" and at the words he lifted the plumed beaver from his head, and, in a style of mock courtesy, waved the dummies an adieu. "Good-night, worthy friends!" he laughingly repeated, as he rode through their midst. "Don't trouble yourselves to return my salutation. Ha! ha! ha!"

The young courtier, moving after, joined in the jocular leave-taking; and both merrily rode away – leaving the footpad to the companionship of his speechless "pals."

Volume One – Chapter Ten

An incident so ludicrous could not fail to tickle the fancy of the young courtier; and bring his risible faculties into full play. It produced this effect; and to such a degree that for some minutes he could do nothing but laugh – loud enough to have been heard to the remotest confines of the Heath.

"I shouldn't wonder," – said he, recalling to mind the contents of his sister's letter; "not a bit should I wonder, if this fellow be the same who stopped the lady's coach. You've heard of it?"

"I have," laughingly replied the cavalier. "No doubt, Gregory Garth and the coach-robber you speak of are one and the same individual."

"Ha! ha! ha! to think of the six attendants! – there was that number, I believe, escorting the coach – to think of all six running away, and from one man!"

"You forget the band? Ha! ha! ha! It is to be presumed, that Gregory had six scarecrows rigged up for that occasion also. Truer men, by my troth, than the cavaliers who accompanied the lady. Ha! ha! But for the immorality of the act it's an artifice worthy of my old instructor in the art of *venerie*. After all, I should have expected better of the ex-forester than finding him thus transformed into a footpad. Poor devil! who knows what may have been his trials and temptations? There are wrongs daily done upon England's people, in the name – ay, and with the knowledge – of England's king, that would make a criminal of the meekest Christian; and Gregory Garth was never particularly distinguished for the virtue of meekness. Something may have been done to madden, and drive him to this desperate life. I shall know anon."

"One thing in his favour," suggested the young courtier, who notwithstanding the rude introduction, appeared to be favourably inclined towards the footpad. "He did not ill-treat the lady, though left all alone with her. True, he stripped her of her jewellery; but beyond that he behaved gently enough. I have just heard the sequel of the story, as I came through Uxbridge. Ha! ha! odd as the rest of the affair. It appears that before leaving her, he caught one of her runaway attendants; forced him back upon the box; and, putting the whip and reins into the varlet's hands, compelled him to continue the journey!"

"All as you say, Master Wade. I heard the same story myself; though little suspecting that the facetious footpad was my old henchman Gregory Garth. That part of his performance was natural enough. The rogue had always a dash of gallantry in his composition. I'm pleased to think it's not all gone out of him."

"He appears very repentant after – "

"After having been within an inch of taking the life of one, who – rather should I say of losing his own. It was a lucky turn that brought the moonlight on that bearded visage of his: else he might now have been lying in the middle of the road, silent as his scare-crow companions. By my troth! I should have felt sorry to have been his executioner. I am glad it has turned out as it has – more especially since he has promised, if not actual repentance, at least some sort of reformation. It may not be too late. There's good in him – or was – if his evil courses have not caused its complete eradication. Well! I am likely to see him soon; when I shall submit his soul to the test, and find whether there is still in it enough of the old honesty to give hope of his regeneration. The entrance to your father's park?"

The speaker nodded towards a sombre pile of ivy-grown mason-work – in the centre of which could be seen a massive gate, its serried rails just discernible under the tall chestnuts, that in double row shadowed the avenue beyond.

The heir of Bulstrode did not need to be thus reminded. Three years of absence had not effaced from his memory the topographic details of scenes so much loved, so long enjoyed. Well remembered he the ways that led towards the paternal mansion; and already, ere his fellow traveller ceased speaking, he had pulled up opposite the oft-used entrance.

"My journey extends farther up the road," continued the cavalier, without having made more than a momentary pause in his speech. "I am sorry, Master Wade, to lose your agreeable company; but we must part."

"Not sir," said Walter, looking earnestly towards him, "not, I trust, till you have given me an opportunity of thanking you for the service you have rendered me. But for your companionship, the adventure, as well as my day's journey, might have had a very different termination. I should certainly have been plundered – perhaps impaled on the long pike of your quondam servitor. Thanks to you, that I am to reach home in safety. I hope, therefore, you will not object to my knowing the name of one, who has done me such an essential service."

"I have but slight claim to your gratitude," replied the cavalier. "In truth not any, Master Wade. By the merest accident have we been thrown together as *compagnons de voyage*."

"Your modesty, sir," rejoined the young courtier – as he spoke bending gracefully towards his companion, "claims my admiration equally with that courage, of which I have now witnessed more than one display. But you cannot hinder me from feeling gratitude; nor yet from expressing it. If you deny me the privilege of knowing your name, I can at least tell my friends, how much I am indebted to *Sir Henry the Unknown*."

"*Sir* Henry! Ah! Garth styled me so. The old forester is fond of bestowing titles. My father was so called; and honest Gregory, in his luck of heraldic skill, thinks the title must be hereditary. It is not so, however. I have not received the honour of knighthood from the sword of sacred majesty. What's more, it's not likely I ever shall. Ha! ha!"

The words that concluded this speech – as well as the laugh that followed – were uttered in a tone of defiant bitterness: as if the speaker held such royal honours in but slight estimation.

The young courtier thus baulked in obtaining the name of his protector, remained for a moment without making rejoinder. He was thinking whether in the matter of names he could not claim a fair exchange of confidence – since he had freely given his own, – when the cavalier, as if divining his thoughts, again accosted him.

"Pardon me," resumed the latter, in a tone of apology. "Pardon me, Master Wade, for my apparent want of courtesy. You honour me by asking my name; and, since you have treated me so frankly, I have neither the right nor the wish to conceal it from you. It is plain Henry Holtspur – not *Sir* Henry, as you have just heard me designated. Furthermore, Master Wade; if you know anything of a rather dilapidated dwelling yclept 'Stone Dean,' – situated in the heart of the forest, some three miles from here – and think you could find your way thither, I can promise you a welcome, a mouthful of venison, a cup of Canary to wash it down; and – not much more, I fear. During most mornings I am at home, if you will take your chance of riding over."

"Nay, you must visit me first," rejoined Walter, "I should ask you in now; but for the lateness of the hour. I fear our people have retired for the night. You will come again; and permit me to introduce you to my father. I am sure he would like to thank you for the service you have done me; and my sister Marion too."

A thrill of sweet secret pleasure shot through the heart of Henry Holtspur, as he listened to the last words. Thanks from Marion! A thought from her – even though it were but given in gratitude!

Love! love! sweet art thou in the enjoyment; but far more delicious is the dream of thy anticipation!

Had the young courtier been closely observing, he might, at that moment, have detected upon the countenance of Henry Holtspur, a peculiar expression – one which he appeared endeavouring to conceal.

The brother of his mistress is the last man, to whom a lover cares to confide the secret of his bosom. It may not be a welcome tale – even when the fortunes are equal, the introduction *en règle*, and the intentions honourable. But if in any of these circumstances there chance to be informality, then becomes the brother the *bête noire* of the situation.

Was some thought of this kind causing Henry Holtspur a peculiar emotion – prompting him to repress, or conceal it from the brother of Marion Wade? On returning thanks for the promised introduction, why did he speak with an air of embarrassment? Why upon his countenance, of open manly character, was there an expression almost furtive?

The young courtier, without taking note of these circumstances, continued to urge his request.

"Well – you promise to come?"

"Sometime – with pleasure."

"Nay, Master Holtspur, 'sometime' is too indefinite; but, indeed, so has been my invitation. I shall alter it. You will come to-morrow? Father gives a *fête* in our park. 'Tis my birthday; and the sports, I believe, have been arranged on an extensive scale. Say, you will be one of our guests?"

"With all my heart, Master Wade. I shall be most happy."

After exchanging a mutual good-night, the two travellers parted – Walter entering the gate of the park – while the cavalier continued along the highway, that ran parallel to its palings.

Volume One – Chapter Eleven

After seeing the two travellers ride off, the disappointed footpad stood listening, till the hoof-strokes of their horses died upon the distant road.

Then, flinging himself upon a bank of earth, and, having assumed a sitting posture – with his elbows resting upon his knees, and his bearded chin reposing between the palms of his hands – he remained for some moments silent as the Sphinx, and equally motionless.

His features betrayed a strange compound of expressions – not to be interpreted by any one ignorant of his history, or of the adventure that had just transpired. The shadow of a contrite sadness was visible upon his brow; while in his dark grey eye could be detected a twinkle of chagrin – as he thought of the pair of purses so unexpectedly extricated from his grasp.

Plainly was a struggle passing within his bosom. Conscience and cupidity had quarrelled – their first outfall for a long period of time. The contending emotions prevented speech; and, it is superfluous to say, his companions respected his silence.

In the countenance of Gregory Garth, despite his criminal calling – even in his worst moments – there were lines indicative of honesty. As he sate by the roadside – that roadside near which he had so often *skulked*– with the moon shining full upon his face, these lines gradually became more distinctly defined; until the criminal cast completely disappeared from his features, leaving only in its place an expression of profound melancholy. But for the *mise en scène*, and the *dramatis personae* surrounding him, any one passing at the moment might have mistaken him for an honest man, suffering from some grave and recent misfortune.

But as no one passed, he was left free to indulge, both in his sorrow and his silence.

At length the latter came to an end. The voice of the penitent footpad – no longer in the stern accents of menace and command, but in soft subdued tones – once more interrupted the stillness of the night.

“Oh lor – oh lor!” muttered he, “who’d a believed I shud ha’ holden my pike to the breast o’ young master Henry? Niver a thought had I to use it. Only bluster to make ’em yield up; but he’ll think as how I intended it all the same. Oh lor – oh lor! he’ll niver forgi’ me! Well, it can’t a’ be holp now; an’ here go to keep the promise I’ve made him. No more touchin’ o’ purses, or riflin’ o’ fine ladies on this road. That game be all over.”

For a moment the dark shadow upon his brow appeared to partake slightly of chagrin – as if there still lingered some regret, for the promise he had made, and the step he was about to take. The strife between conscience and cupidity seemed not yet definitively decided.

There was another interval of silence, and then came the decision. It was in favour of virtue. Conscience had triumphed.

“I’ll keep my word to him,” cried he, springing to his feet, as if to give emphasis to the resolve. “I’ll keep it, if I shud starve.”

“Disband!” he continued, addressing himself to the silent circle, and speaking in a tone of mock command. “Disband! ye beggars! Your captain, Greg’ry Garth, han’t no longer any need o’ your sarvices. Dang it meeats!” added he, still preserving his tone of mock seriousness, “I be sorry to part wi’ ye. Ye’ve been as true as steel to me; an’ ne’er a angry word as iver passed atween us. Well, it can’t be holp, boys – that it can’t. The best o’ friends must part, some time or other; but afore we sepperates, I’m a-goin’ to purvide for one an’ all on ye. I’ve got a friend over theer in Uxbridge, who keeps a biggish trade goin’ on – they call it panprokin’. It’s a money-making business. I dare say he can find places for o’ ye. Ye be sure o’ doin’ well wi’ him. Ye’ll be in good company, wi’ plenty o’ goold and jeweltry all round ye. Don’t be afeerd o’ what’ll happen to ye. I’ll take duppleickets for yer security; so that in case o’ my needin’ ye again – ”

At this crisis the fantastic valedictory of the retiring robber was brought to a sudden termination, by his hearing a sound – similar to those for which his ear had been but too well-trained to listen. It was the footfall of a horse, denoting the approach of a horseman – a traveller. It was neither of those who had just passed over the Heath: since it came from the direction opposite to that in which they had gone – up the road from Redhill.

There was but one horseman – as the hoof-stroke indicated. From the same index it could be told, that he was coming on at a slow pace – a walk in fact – as if ignorant of the road, or afraid of proceeding at a rapid rate along a path, which was far from being a smooth one.

On hearing the hoof-stroke, Gregory Garth instinctively, as instantly, desisted from his farcical apostrophe; and, without offering the slightest apology to his well-behaved auditors, turned his face away from them, and stood listening.

"A single horseman?" muttered he to himself, "Crawlin' along at snail pace? A farmer maybe, who's tuk a drap too much at the Saracen's Head, an' 's failed asleep in his saddle? Now I think o't, it be market day in that thear town o' Uxbridge."

The instincts of the footpad – which had for the moment yielded before the moral shock of the humiliating encounter with his old master – began to resume dominion over him.

"Wonder," continued he, in a muttered tone, "Wonder if the chaw-bacon ha' got any cash about him? Or have he been, and drunk it all at the inn? Pish! what do it matter whether he have or no? Ha'nt I gone an' promised Master Henry 'twould be my last night? Dang it! I must keep my word.

"Stay!" he continued, after reflecting a moment, "I sayed that it shud be my last *night*? That's 'zactly what you sayed, an' nothin' else, Greg'ry Garth! It wouldn't be breakin' no promise if I —

"The night be yooung yet! 'Taint much after eleven o' the clock? I've just heard Chaffont bells strikin' *eleven*. A night arn't over till *twelve*. That's the 'law o' the land.'

"What's the use o' talkin'? Things can't be wuss wi' me than they is arready. I've stole the sheep; an' if I'm to swing for't, I moat as well goo in for the hul flock. After all, Master Henry ha'nt promised to *keep* me; an' I may starve for my honest intentions. I ha'nt enough silver left to kiver a spittle with; an' as for these rags, they arn't goin' to fetch me a fortune. Dash it! I'll stop chaw-bacon, an' see whether he ha'nt been a sellin' his beests.

"Keep yeer places, lads!" continued he, turning once more to his dummies, and addressing them as if he really believed them to be "lads."

"Keep yeer places; and behave jest the same, as if nuthin' 'd been sayed about our separatin'!"

Concluding his speech with this cautionary peroration, the footpad glided back under the shadow of the hovel; and silently placed himself in a position to pounce upon the unwary wayfarer, whose ill-luck was conducting him to the crossing of Jarret's Heath at that late hour of the night.

Volume One – Chapter Twelve

The robber had not long to wait for his victim. The necessary preparations for receiving the latter occupied some time – enough for the slow-paced traveller to get forward upon the ground; which he succeeded in doing, just as Gregory Garth had secured himself an ambush, within the shadow of the hovel. There stood he, in the attitude of a hound in leash, straining upon the spring.

When the horseman, emerging from under the arcade of the trees, rode out into the open ground, and the moonlight fell upon him and his horse, the footpad was slightly taken by surprise. Instead of a farmer, fuddled with cheap tipple obtained at the "Saracen's Head," Garth saw before him an elegant cavalier, mounted upon a smoking but handsome steed, and dressed in a full suit of shining satin!

Though surprised, Gregory was neither dismayed, nor disconcerted. On the contrary, he was all the better satisfied at seeing – in the place of a drunken clod-hopper, perchance with an empty wallet – a gentleman whose appearance gave every promise of a plethoric purse; and one also, whose aspect declared to the practised eye of the footpad, that compelling him to part with it, would be an achievement neither difficult nor dangerous.

Without losing an instant, after making this observation, the robber rushed out from under the shadow of the hut; and, just as he had hailed the two horsemen half-an-hour before, did he salute the satin-clad cavalier.

Very different however was the response which he now received in return to the stereotyped demand, "Stand and deliver!" Such travellers as the black horseman were rare upon the road; and he of the smoking steed, and satin vestments, instead of drawing a pistol from his holsters, or a sword from its sheath, threw up both hands in token of surrender; and, in a trembling voice, piteously appealed for mercy.

"Hang it, Master!" cried Garth, still keeping his pike pointed at the breast of the frightened traveller. "Doant be so skeeart! They woant hurt ye, man. Nee'r a one o' 'em's goin' to lay a finger on ye – that be, if ye doant make a fool o' yerself by showin' resistance. Keep yeer ground, boys! The gentleman han't no intention to gie trouble."

"No – I assure you, no!" eagerly ejaculated the traveller. "I mean no harm to anybody. Believe me, friends! I don't, indeed. You're welcome to what money I've got. It isn't much: I'm only a poor messenger of the king."

"A messenger of the king!" echoed the captain of the robbers, showing a new interest in the announcement.

"And, if I may ask the question," proceeded he, drawing nearer to the traveller, and rudely clutching hold of his bridle-rein, "Whither be ye bound, good Master?"

"O sir," replied the trembling courtier, "I am glad I've met with some one who, perhaps, can tell me the way. I am the bearer of a message from his gracious Majesty to Captain Scarthe, of the King's Cuirassiers; who is, or should be, by this time, quartered with Sir Marmaduke Wade, of Bulstrode Park – somewhere in this part of the county of Buckingham."

"Ho, ho!" muttered Gregory Garth, speaking to himself, "message from his Majesty to Captain Scarthe! – Sir Marmaduke Wade! Bulstrode Park! What the ole Nick be all this about?"

"You know Sir Marmaduke Wade, do you not, good friend?"

"Well, Master Silk-and-Satin," scornfully drawled the footpad, "without havin' the pleasure o' knowin' you, or the honour o' bein' your good friend eyther, I think as how I mout say, that I does know somethin' o' that very gentleman, Sir Marmaduke Wade; though it be news to me that theer be such a individable as Captain Scarthe, either in the county o' Bucks, or in the kingdom o' England – to say nothin' o' a troop o' King's Kewrasseers being quartered at Bulstrode Park. All o' that there be Greek to Greg'ry Garth."

"Good friend! I assure you it's nothing but the truth. Captain Scarthe and his troop have certainly arrived at Bulstrode Park by this time; and if you will only conduct me thither – "

"Bah! that arn't my bizness. Conduct yerself. Bulstrode Park aint a step from here. As to Captain Scarthe, or the King's Kewrasseers, I shud n't know eyther one nor t'other from a side o' sole leather. If ye've got e'er a message, ye can hand it over to me, an' along wi' it whatever loose cash ye be carryin' on your fine-clad carcass. Fork out!"

"Oh! sir; to my money you're welcome – my watch also and the chain. But as you love our good king, let me ride on upon the errand, on which he has despatched me!"

"Maybe I *don't* love 'our good King,' so much as ye think for, ye spangled flunkey! Come! out wi' all ye've got, or these fellows'll strip ye to the skin. Ne'er mind, boys! Keep yer ground; he an't a-goin' to be troublesome."

"No, no, good friends. I promise you I shall not. I yield up everything. Here's my purse. For your sakes I'm sorry there's not more in it. Here's my watch. I had it a present from our most gracious Queen. You see, sir, it's very valuable?"

The footpad eagerly clutched at the timepiece; and, holding it between his great horny fingers, examined it under the light of the moon.

"It must be valleyable," said he, turning it over and over. "It appears to be kivered all over wi' preecious stones. A present from the Queen, ye say?"

"I had it from her majesty's own hands."

"Dang her for a French – . This be the way she spends our English money. She be a bigger robber than Greg'ry Garth – that she be – and ye can tell her I sayed so, the next time you ha' the chance o' palaverin' to her. Go on! Emp'y your pockets o' everything."

"I've only this penknife; these tablets, and pencil – that's all, I assure you."

"What's that glitterin' thing," asked the footpad, pointing to something the courtier appeared anxious to conceal, "as hangs about yer neck? Let's have a squint at it?"

"That, sir, – that is a – a – a locket."

"A locket; what be that?"

"Well, it's – it's – "

"It be wonderful like a bit o' a watch. What be inside o' it?"

"Nothing."

"Nothin'. Then, what do you carry it for?"

"Oh, there is something inside; nothing of value, however; it's only a lock of hair."

"Only hair. A love-lock, I s'pose? Well, that arn't o' much valley sure enough – leastwise to me it arn't – and yer may keep the hair. But I'll trouble you for the case. It look like it mout pawn for somethin'. Quick, off wi' it!"

The terrified courtier instantly complied with the demand – in his fright not even taking advantage of the permission granted him to preserve the precious love token; but delivering both lock and locket into the outstretched fingers of the footpad.

"O sir," said he, in a supplicating tone, "that is everything – everything!"

"No it arn't," gruffly returned the robber, "you've got a niceish doublet thear – satin spick-span – trunks to match; boots an' spurs o' the first quality; a tidyish hat and feathers; an' a sharpish toad-sticker by yer side. I doant partickler want any o' these things for myself; but I've got a relation that I'd like to make 'em a present to. So, strip!"

"What, sir! would you send me naked on my errand? You forget that I'm the bearer of a message from the king?"

"No, daang me if I do; and daang the king, too! That ere's potery for ye. I've heerd ye be fond o' it at Court. I like prose better; and my prose be, dismount an' strip."

Notwithstanding the tone of raillery in which the footpad was pleased to express himself, the unfortunate courtier saw that he was all the while in serious earnest, and that there would be danger in resisting his demands.

Spite of his reluctance therefore, he was compelled to slide down from his saddle, and disrobe himself in the middle of the road.

Not until he stood stark naked, did the relentless robber suffer him to desist – leaving to him little else than his shirt and stockings!

"O sir! you will not mount me thus?" said the wretched man, appealing with upheld hands to the footpad. "Surely you will not send me in this guise – the bearer of a royal message? What a figure I should cut on horseback, without my boots – without my hat or doublet – without – "

"Stash yer palaver!" cried Garth, who was busied making the cast-off clothes into a bundle. "Who said ye war goin' to cut a figger a-horseback? Whar's yer horse, I sh'd like to know?"

The courtier gave a doubting nod towards the steed.

"Oh!" responded the footpad, coolly continuing his task, "moat a been your horse ten minutes agone. He be myen now. I've been a-foot long enough, while you an' yours ha' been ridin'. It be my time to mount for a bit. That's only fair turn an' turn, ar'nt it?"

The dismounted messenger made no reply. Though surprise and terror had by this time well-nigh deprived him of his senses, he had enough left to admonish him, that all remonstrance would be idle. He said nothing, therefore; but stood with shivering frame and teeth chattering like castanets: for it chanced to be one of those chill autumnal nights, when the cold is felt almost as sensibly as in December.

The footpad took no further notice of him, until he had completed the binding of the bundle. Then straightening himself up, face to face with his victim, he surveyed him from head to foot with a half-quizzical, half serious look.

The latter at length predominated – as if some suspicious thought had come uppermost in his mind.

"Cowardly as ye be, ye king's minion," said he, addressing the trembling messenger in a tone of scornful bitterness, "thear mout be cunnin' an' mischief in ye. I'll take care that ye doant go furder this night. Come along into the house here! Ye woant object to that – seein' as ye're so starved-like outside. Come along!"

And without waiting for either the assent or refusal of the individual thus solicited, the robber seized him by the wrist; and half led, half dragged, him over the threshold of the hovel.

Once inside the ruin, he proceeded to bind his unresisting victim with cords, which he had taken in along with him. He had plenty of light for his purpose: for a portion of the roof had fallen in, and the moonlight shone brightly upon the thatch-strewn floor.

Expert in the handling of ropes, his task was soon performed; and in a few minutes the King's messenger stood with his arms bound behind his back, and his ankles lashed as tightly together, as if he had been a dangerous felon!

"Now," said the robber, after securing the last loop, apparently to his satisfaction, "you woant come loose till somebody lets ye; and that arnt goin' to be me. I ha'nt no wish to be cruel to ye – tho' ye are a king's flunkey – an' as ye'll be easier lyin' down than stannin' up, I'll put you in that position."

As he said this, he let go his hold, and permitted the unfortunate man to fall heavily upon the floor.

"Lie thear, Master Messenger, till somebody lifts ye. *I'll* see to the deliverin' o' yer message. Good-night!"

And with a mocking laugh Gregory Garth strode back over the threshold – leaving the astounded traveller to reflections that were neither very lucid nor very pleasant.

After passing out of the hut, the footpad hastened to take his departure from the spot.

He led the steed of the messenger out into the middle of the road, and tied the bridle he had made to the cantle of the saddle. He then glided up to the near side of the horse; and caught hold of the withers – as if about to mount.

Something, however, caused him to hesitate; and an interval elapsed, without his making any effort to get into the saddle.

"Daangit, old partners!" cried he, at length – addressing himself to his band of dummies, whom he had been for sometime neglecting – "'twon't do for us to part this fashion. If Greg'ry Garth are promoted to be a *highwayman*, he arn't goin' to look down on his pals o' the *path*. No! Ye shall go long wi' me, one an' all. Though the hul o' ye put thegither arnt worth this shinin' ticker I've got in my fob, for all that I can make better use o' ye, than leavin' ye here to scare the crows o' Jarret's Heath. Come along, my boys! I'se boun', this stout charger from the royal mews be able to carry the hul on us, an' not think it much o' a looad neyther. I'll find room for all o' ye – some on the crupper, and the rest on the withers. Come along then!"

Without waiting for any reply to his proposal, he glided around the edge of the opening: and, rapidly dismantling the dummies one after the other, he returned towards the horse with their ravished vestments.

Hanging the "old clo'" across both croup and withers – and there attaching them by strings – he at length climbed into the saddle lately occupied by the king's messenger, and rode gleefully away.

Just as he cleared the crossing of the roads, the clock of Chalfont Saint Peter's tolled the hour of midnight.

"Exact twelve!" exclaimed he, in a tone of congratulation. "Well! 'twur a close shave; but I've kep' my word to Master Henry! If I had broke that, I could niver a looked him in the face again. Ha! Hear them old church bells! How sweet they sound on the air o' the night! They mind me o' the time, when I wur innocent child. Ring on! ring on! ye bells o' Peter's Chaffont! Ring on, an' tell the world that *Greg'ry Garth is biddin' good-bye to the road*!"

Volume One – Chapter Thirteen

Were the Chiltern Hills stripped of the timber, to this day screening a considerable portion of their surface, they would present a striking resemblance to those portions of the great North American Steppe, known in trapper-parlance as “rolling prairies.” With equal truthfulness might they be likened to the Ocean, after a great storm, when the waves no longer carry their foaming crests, and the undulations of the swell have, to a certain extent, lost their parallelism. If you can fancy the liquid element then suddenly transformed into solid earth, you will have a good idea of the “shape” of the Chilterns.

From time immemorial have these hills enjoyed a peculiar reputation. In the forward march of England’s agriculture, it was long ere their sterile soil tempted the touch of the plough; and even at this hour vast tracts of their surface lie unreclaimed – in “commons” covered with heath, furze, or forests of beechwood.

At various periods of our history, their fame has not been of the fairest. Their wild woods, while giving shelter to the noble stag, and other creatures of the chase, also served as a choice retreat for the outlaw and the robber; and in past times, it became necessary to appoint a “steward or warden,” with a body of armed attendants, to give safe-conduct to the traveller, passing through their limits. Hence the origin of that noted office – now happily a sinecure; though, unhappily, not the only sinecure of like obsolete utility in this grievously taxed land.

Near the eastern verge of the Chiltern country, is situated the noble park of Bulstrode. It is one of the most ancient inclosures in England – older than the invasion of the Norman; perhaps as old as the evacuation of the Roman. In the former epoch it was the scene of strife – as the remains of a Saxon encampment lying within its limits – with a singular legend attached – will testify.

Extending over an area of a thousand acres, there is scarce a rood of Bulstrode Park that could be called level ground – the camp enclosure, already mentioned, forming the single exception. The surface exhibits a series of smooth rounded hills, and undulating ridges, separated from each other by deep valley-like ravines – the concavities of the latter so resembling the convexities of the former, as to suggest the idea that the hills have been scooped out of the valleys, and placed in an inverted position beside them. The park itself offers a fair specimen of the scenery of the Chilterns – the ocean swell suddenly brought to a stand, the waves, and the “troughs” between, having lost their parallelism. The valleys traverse in different directions, here running into each other; there shallowing upward, or ending abruptly in deep romantic dells, thickly copsed with hawthorn, holly, or hazel – the favourite haunts of the nightingale. The ridges join each other in a similar fashion; or rise into isolated hills, so smoothly coped as to seem artificial. Belts of shrubbery and clumps of gigantic trees – elm, oak, beech, and chestnut – mottle the slopes, or crown their summits; while the spaces between exhibit a sward of that vivid verdure – only to be seen in the pastures and parks of England. Such was Bulstrode Park in the seventeenth century; such with but slight change, is it at the present day – a worthy residence for the noblest family in the land.

It is the morning of the fête arranged by Sir Marmaduke Wade – to celebrate the anniversary of his son’s birthday, and at the same time to commemorate his return to the paternal mansion.

The red aurora of an autumnal morning has given promise of a brilliant day; and as if to keep that promise, a golden sun, already some degrees above the horizon, is gradually mounting into a canopy of cloudless blue.

His beams striking obliquely through the foliage of the forest, fall with a subdued light upon the earth; but in the more open undulations of the park they have already kissed the dew from the grass; and the verdant turf seems to invite the footstep – like some vast carpet spread over the arena of the expected sports.

It is evident that the invitation of Sir Marmaduke had been extensively circulated, and accepted. On every road and path tending in the direction of his residence, and from a distance of many miles, groups of rustics in their gayest holiday dresses, have been seen from an early hour in the morning, proceeding towards the scene of the fête – old and young, fair and dark, comely and common-looking, all equally joyous and gleeful.

Within the lines of the old Saxon encampment a large company has assembled. There are thousands in all – some roaming over the ground, some seated under shady trees on the summit of the turf-grown moat. Here and there may be seen large numbers forming a "ring" – the spectators of some sport that is progressing in their midst.

Of sports there are many kinds carried on at the same time. Here is played the game of "balloon:" a huge leathern ball, inflated with hot air, and bandied about amidst a circle of players – the game being to keep the ball passing from one to the other.

There you may see another party engaged in a game of "bowls," fashionable as the favourite of Royalty; and further on, a crowd clustered around a contest of "single-stick," where two stout fellows are cudgelling one another, as if determined upon a mutual cracking of skulls – a feat, however, not so easy of accomplishment.

Not far off you may behold the gentler sport of "kiss in the ring," where blue-eyed Saxon girls are pursued by their rustic beaux, and easily overtaken.

At other places you may witness a wrestling match, a game of foot-ball, or quoits, with "pitching the stone," racing, leaping, and vaulting.

At a short distance off, and outside the encampment, may be seen an *al fresco* kitchen, on an extensive scale; where the servants of Sir Marmaduke are engaged in roasting immense *barons* of beef, and huge hogs cleft lengthwise. An hour or two later, and this spot will be the roost attractive of all.

Not alone does the peasant world appear in the park of Sir Marmaduke Wade. Cavaliers picturesquely attired, in the splendid costumes of the time, along with high-born dames, are seen standing in groups over the ground. Some are spectators of the sports, though not a few of both sexes occasionally take part in them. The *fête champètre* is a fashionable mode of amusement where rank is, for the time, surrendered to the desire for simple enjoyment; and it is not altogether *outré* for the mistress of the mansion to mingle with her maidens in the "out-door dance," nor the squire to take a hand at "single-stick," or "bowls," with his rustic retainer.

Even Royalty, in those days was accustomed to such condescension!

Such was the gay spectacle exhibited in the park of Sir Marmaduke Wade, to celebrate the anniversary of that happy day that had given him a son and heir.

Volume One – Chapter Fourteen

The bells of Uxbridge were tolling the hour of noon. Scarthe's Cuirassiers were still by the roadside inn, though in full armour, and each trooper standing by the side of his horse, ready to take saddle.

It was a late hour to begin their march; but they had been detained. The freshly rasped hoofs of the horses might declare the cause of the detention. The forges of Uxbridge had been called into requisition, for the shoeing of the troop.

There was no special need for haste. They had not far to go; and the duty upon which they were bent, could be entered into at any hour. At twelve they were all ready for the *route*.

"To horse!" was uttered in the usual abrupt tone of command; and at the same instant, the two officers were seen issuing from the doorway of the inn.

The clattering of steel, as the cuirassiers sprang to their saddles, could be heard on the calm air of the autumn noon, to the distance of a mile. The shopkeepers of Uxbridge heard it; and were only too glad when told its interpretation. All night long Scarthe's royal swashbucklers had been swaggering through the streets, disturbing the tranquillity of their town, and leaving many a score unsettled.

No wonder they rejoiced, when that clinking of sabres, and clashing of *cuisses*, declared the departure of Captain Scarthe and his following from the hostelry of the Saracen's Head.

Their men having mounted, the two officers betook themselves to their saddles, though with less alertness. The cornet seemed to have a difficulty in finding his stirrup; and, after he had succeeded in getting into his seat, it appeared an open question whether he should be able to keep it. Stubbs was intoxicated.

His superior officer was affected in a similar fashion, though to a less degree. At all events he did not show his tipsiness so palpably. He was able to mount into the saddle, without the hand of a helper; and when there, could hold himself upright. Habit may have given him this superiority over his comrade: for Scarthe was an old soldier, and Stubbs was not.

The carouse of the preceding night had commenced at the roadside inn – early in the evening.

The incident that had there occurred – not of the most comforting nature, either to Scarthe or his subaltern – had stimulated them to continue at their cups – only transferring the scene to the inns of Uxbridge. A stray cavalier or two, picked up in the town, had furnished them with the right sort of associates for a midnight frolic; and it was not till the blue light of morn was breaking over the meadows of the Colne, that the wearied roisterers staggered across the old bridge, and returned to their temporary quarters at the roadside inn.

While the horses of the troop were in the hands of the farriers, the two officers had passed an hour or two, tossing upon a brace of the best beds the inn afforded; and it was close upon twelve at noon when Scarthe awoke, and called for a cup of burnt sack to steady his nerves – quivering after the night's carouse.

A slight breakfast sufficed for both captain and cornet. This despatched, they had ordered the troop to horse, and were about to continue their march.

"Comrades!" cried Scarthe, addressing himself to his followers, as soon as he felt fairly fixed in the saddle. "We've been spending the night in a nest of rebels. This Uxbridge is a town of traitors – Quakers, Dissenters and Puritans – alike disloyal knaves."

"They are by Gec-gec-ged!" hiccuped Stubbs, trying to keep himself upright on his horse.

"They are; you speak true, captain – they're all you say," chorussed several of the troopers, who had come away without settling their scores.

"Then let them go to the devil;" muttered Scarthe, becoming alike regardless of Uxbridge and its interests. "Let's look to what's before us. No – not that. First what's behind us. No pretty girls in

the inn here. Ah! that's a pity. Never mind the women, so long as there's wine. Hillo, Old Boniface! Once more set your taps a-flowing. What will you drink, vagabonds? Beer?"

"Ay, ay – anything you like, noble captain."

"Beer, Boniface; and for me more sack. What say you, Stubbs?"

"Sack, sa-a-ck!" stammered the cornet. "Burnt sa-a-ck. Nothing like it, by Ge-ged!"

"Who pays?" inquired the landlord, evidently under some apprehension as to the probability of this ultimate order being for cash.

"Pays, knave!" shouted Scarthe, pulling a gold piece from his doublet, and shieing it in the landlord's face. "Do you take the king's cuirassiers for highway robbers? The wine – the wine! Quick with it, or I'll draw your corks with the point of my sword."

With the numerous staff, which an inn in those times could afford to maintain, both the beer and the more generous beverage were soon within reach of the lips of those intended to partake of them. The national drink was brought first; but out of deference to their officers, the men refrained partaking of it, till the sack was poured into the cups.

Scarthe seized the goblet presented to him and raising it aloft, called out: —

"The King!"

"The King, by Ge-ged," seconded Stubbs.

"The King – the King!" vociferated the half hundred voices of their followers – the bystanders echoing the phrase only in faint murmuring.

"Goblets to the ground!" commanded the captain – at the same time tossing his own into the middle of the road.

The action was imitated by every man in the troop – each throwing away his empty vessel, till the pavement was thickly strewn with pots of shining pewter.

"Foorward – ma-r-ch!" cried Scarthe, giving the spur to his charger; and with a mad captain at their head, and a maudlin cornet in the rear, the cuirassiers filed out from the inn; and took the road in the direction of Red Hill.

Despite the wine within him, the captain of the cuirassiers, was at that moment, in a frame of mind, anything but contented. One of his reasons for having drunk so deeply, was to drown the recollection – yet rankling in his bosom – of the insult he fancied himself to have suffered on the preceding night, and which he further fancied to have lowered him in the estimation of his followers. Indeed, he knew this to be the case; for as he rode onward at the head of his troop, his whole thoughts were given to the *black horseman*, and the mode by which he might revenge himself on that mysterious individual.

Scarthe was on the way to country quarters – near which he had been told, the black horseman had his home – and he comforted himself with the thought, that should these prove dull, he would find amusement, in the accomplishment of some scheme, by which his vengeance might be satisfied.

Could his eye at that moment have penetrated the screen of foliage rising above the crest of Red Hill, he might have seen behind it, the man he meant to injure – mounted on that sable steed from which he derived his *sobriquet*. He might have seen him suddenly wheel back from the bushes, and gallop off in the direction in which he and his cuirassiers were marching – towards Bulstrode Park – the residence of Sir Marmaduke Wade.

Though Scarthe saw not this, his midday march was not performed without his meeting with an incident – one worth recording, even for its singularity; though it was otherwise of significant interest to the cuirassier captain.

In front of a dilapidated hovel upon Jarret's Heath, both he and his troop were brought to a sudden stand, on hearing a strange noise which appeared to proceed from the ruin. It was a groan – or rather a series of groans – now and then varied by a sharp scream.

On entering the hut, the cause of this singular *fracas* was at once discovered: a man lying upon the floor – stripped to his shirt, and bound hand and foot! This semi-nude individual informed them,

that he had just awakened from a horrid dream; which he now feared was no dream, but a reality! He proclaimed himself a courier of the King, bound to Bulstrode Park, with a despatch for Captain Scarthe! But the despatch was lost, with everything else he had borne upon his body – even to the horse that had borne *him*!

After the full explanation had been given, Scarthe's chagrin at the failure of the King's message, was counterbalanced by the amusement caused by the misadventure of the messenger; and, after remounting the unfortunate man, and sending him whence he had come, he continued his march, making the wild waste of Jarret's Heath ring with a loud and long continued cachinnation.

Volume One – Chapter Fifteen

The great clock in the tower of Bulstrode mansion, was tolling the hour of noon. The sports were in full progress – both actors and spectators at the maximum of enjoyment.

Here and there a knot of sturdy yeomen might be seen, standing close together – so that their conversation might not be overheard – discussing among themselves some late edict of royalty; and generally in tones of condemnation.

The arbitrary exactions, of which one and all of them had of late been victims, the tyrannous modes of taxation – hitherto unheard of in England —*ship*, *coat*, and *conduct* money – forced loans under the farcical title of *benevolences*; and, above all, the billeting of profligate soldiers in private houses – on individuals, who by some slight act or speech had given offence to the king, or some of his satellites – these were the topics of the time.

Conjoined with these grievances were discussed the kindred impositions and persecutions of that iniquitous council, the Court of High Commission, which for cruel zeal rivalled even the Inquisition – and the infamous Star Chamber, that numbered its victims by thousands.

These truculent tools of tyranny had been for ten years in the full performance of their flagitious work; but, instead of crushing out the spirit of a brave people – which was their real aim and end – they had only been preparing it for a more determined and effective resistance.

The trial of Hampden – the favourite of Buckinghamshire – for his daring refusal to pay the arbitrary impost of “ship money,” had met with the approbation of all honest men; while the judges, who condemned him, were denounced on all sides as worse than “unjust.”

To its eternal glory be it told, nowhere was this noble spirit more eminently displayed than in the shire of Bucks – nowhere, in those days, was the word *liberty* so often, or so emphatically, pronounced. Shall I say, alas! the change?

True, it was yet spoken only in whispers – low, but earnest – like thunder heard far off over the distant horizon – heard only in low mutterings, but ready, at any moment, to play its red lightnings athwart the sky of despotism.

Such mutterings might have been heard in the park of Sir Marmaduke Wade. In the midst of that joyous gathering, signs and sounds of a serious import might have been detected – intermingling with scenes of the most light-hearted hilarity.

It may be wondered why those sentiments of freedom were not more openly declared. But that is easy of explanation. If among the assemblage who assisted at the birthday celebration, there were enemies to Court and King, there were also many who were not friends to the cause of the People. In the crowd which occupied the old camp, there was a liberal sprinkling of spies and informers – with eyes sharply set to see, and ears to catch, every word that might be tainted with treason. No man knew how soon he might be made the victim of a denunciation – how soon he might stand in the awe-inspiring presence of the “Chamber.”

No wonder that men expressed their sentiments with caution.

Among the gentlemen present there was a similar difference of opinion upon political matters – even among members of the same family! But such topics of discussion were studiously avoided, as unbecoming the occasion; and no one, carelessly contemplating the faces of the fair dames and gay cavaliers grouped laughingly together, could have suspected the presence of any sentiment that sprang not from the most contented concordance.

There was one countenance an exception to this general look of contentment – one individual in that brilliant throng that had as yet taken no pleasure in the sports. It was Marion Wade.

She, whose smile was esteemed a blessing wherever it fell, seemed herself unblessed.

Her bosom was a chaos of aching unrest. There was wanting in that concourse one whose presence could have given it peace.

Ever since entering the enclosure of the camp, had the eye of Marion Wade been wandering over the heads of the assembled spectators; over the fosse, and toward the gates of the park – where some late guests still continued to straggle in.

Evidently was she searching for that she failed to find: for her glance, after each sweeping tour of inquiry, fell back upon the faces around her, with an ill-concealed expression of disappointment.

When the last of the company appeared to have arrived, the expression deepened to chagrin.

Her reflections, had they been uttered aloud, would have given a clue to the discontent betraying itself on her countenance.

"He comes not – he wills not to come! Was there nothing in those looks? I've been mad to do as I have done! And what will he think of me? What *can* he? He took up my glove – perhaps a mere freak of curiosity, or caprice – only to fling it down again in disdain? Now I know he cares not to come – else would he have been here. Walter promised to introduce him – to *me*– to *me*! Oh! there was no lure in that. He knows he might have introduced himself. Have I not invited him? Oh! the humiliation!"

Despite her painful reflections, the lady tried to look gay. But the effort was unsuccessful. Among those standing near there were some, who did not fail to notice her wan brow and wandering glance; dames envious of her distinction – gallants, who for one smile from her proud, pretty lips, would have instantly sacrificed their long *love-locks*, and plucked from their hats those trivial tokens, they had sworn so hypocritically to wear.

There was only one, however, who could guess at the cause; and that one could only *guess* at it. Her cousin alone had any suspicion, that the heart of Marion was wandering, as well as her eyes. A knowledge of this fact would have created surprise – almost wonder – in the circle that surrounded her. Marion Wade was a full-grown woman; had been so for more than a year. She had been wooed by many – by some worshipped almost to idolatry. Wealth and title, youth and manhood, lands and lordships, had been laid at her feet; and all alike rejected – not with the proud flourish of the triumphant flirt, but with the tranquil dignity of a true woman, who can only be *wed* after being *won*.

Among the many aspirants to her hand, there was not one who could tell the tale of conquest. More than once had that tale been whispered; but the world would not believe it. It would have been a proud feat for the man who could achieve it – too proud to remain unproclaimed.

And yet it had been achieved, though the world knew it not. She alone suspected it, whose opportunities had been far beyond those of the world. Her cousin, Lora Lovelace, had not failed to feel surprise at those lonely rides – lonely from choice – since her own companionship had been repeatedly declined. Neither had she failed to observe, how Marion had chafed and fretted, at the command of Sir Marmaduke, requiring their discontinuance. There were other circumstances besides: the lost glove, and the bleeding wrist – the fevered sleep at night, and the dreamy reveries by day. How could Lora shut her eyes to signs so significant?

Lora was herself in love, and could interpret them. No wonder that she should suspect that her cousin was in a like dilemma; no wonder she should feel sure that Marion's heart had been given away; though when, and to whom, she was still ignorant, as any stranger within the limits of the camp.

"Marion!" said she, drawing near to her cousin, and whispering so as not to be overheard, "you are not happy to-day?"

"You silly child! what makes you think so?"

"How can I help it? In your looks – "

"What of my looks, Lora?"

"Dear Marion, don't mind me. It's because I dread that others may notice them. There's Winifred Wayland has been watching you; and, more still, that wicked Dorothy Dayrell. She has been keeping her eyes on you like a cat upon a mouse. Cousin! do try to look different, and don't give them something to talk about: for you know that's just what Dorothy Dayrell would desire."

"Look different! How do I look, pray?"

"Ah! I needn't tell you how? *You know how you feel*; and from that you may tell how you look."

"Ho! sage counsellor, you must explain. What is it in my appearance that has struck you? Tell me, chit!"

"You want me to be candid, Marion?"

"I do – I do!"

The answer was given with an eagerness, that left Lora no wish to withhold her explanation.

"Marion," said she, placing her lips close to the ear of her who was alone intended to hear it, "*you are in love*?"

"Nonsense, Lora. What puts such a thought into your silly little head?"

"No nonsense, Marion; I know it by your looks. I don't know who has won you, dear cousin. I only know he's not here to-day. You've been expecting him. He hasn't come. Now!"

"You're either a great big deceiver, or a great little conjuror, Lora. In which of these categories am I to class you?"

"Not in the former, Marion; you know it. Oh! it needs no conjuring for *me* to tell that. But pray don't let it be so easy for others to read your secret, cousin! I entreat you – ."

"You are welcome to your suspicions," said Marion, interrupting her. "And now I shall relieve you from them, by making them a certainty. It is of no use trying any longer to keep that a secret, which in time you would be sure to discover for yourself – I suppose. *I am in love*. As you've said, I'm in love with one who is *not* here. Why should I feel ashamed to tell it you? Nay, if I only thought he loved me as I do him, I'd care little that the whole company knew it – and much less either Winifred Wayland, or Dorothy Dayrell. Let them – "

Just then the voice of this last-mentioned personage was heard in animated conversation – interspersed with peals of laughter, in which a large party was joining.

It was nothing new for Dorothy to be the centre of a circle of laughing listeners: for she was one of the wits of the time. Her talk might not have terminated the dialogue between the cousins, but for the mention of a name – to Marion Wade of all-absorbing interest.

Walter had just finished relating his adventure of the preceding night.

"And this wonderful cavalier," asked Dorothy, "who braved the bullying captain, and frightened the fierce footpads – did he favour you with his name, Master Wade?"

"Oh yes!" answered Walter, "he gave me that – Henry Holtspur."

"Henry Holtspur! Henry Holtspur!" cried several in a breath, as if the name was not new to them, but had some peculiar signification.

"It's the cavalier who rides the black horse," explained one. "The '*black horseman*,' the people called him. One lately come into this neighbourhood. Lives in the old house of Stone Dean. Nobody knows him."

"And yet everybody appears to be talking of him! Mysterious individual! Some troubadour returned from the East?" suggested Winifred Wayland.

"Some trader from the West, more like," remarked Dorothy Dayrell, with a sneer, "whence, I presume, he has imported his levelling sentiments, and a savage for his servant, too, 'tis said. Did you see aught of his Indian, Master Wade?"

"*No*," said the youth, "and very little of himself: as our ride together was after night. But I have hopes of seeing more of him to-day. He promised to be here."

"And is not?"

"I think not. I haven't yet encountered him. 'Tis just possible he may be among the crowd over yonder; or somewhere through the camp. With your permission, ladies, I shall go in search of him."

"Oh! do! do!" exclaimed half a score of sweet voices. "By all means, Master Wade, find the gentleman. You have our permission to introduce him. Tell him we're all dying to make his acquaintance."

Walter went off among the crowd; traversed the camp in all directions; and came back without the object of his search.

"How cruel of him not to come!" remarked the gay Dayrell, as Walter was seen returning alone. "If he only knew the disappointment he is causing! We might have thought less of it, Master Walter, if you hadn't told us he intended to be here. Now I for one shall fancy your fête very stupid without him."

"He may still come," suggested Walter. "I think there are some other guests who have not arrived."

"You are right, Master Wade," interposed one of the bystanders; "yonder's somebody – a man on horseback – on the Heath, outside the palings of the park. He appears to be going towards the gate?"

All eyes were turned in the direction indicated. A horseman was seen upon the Heath outside, about a hundred yards distant from the enclosure; but he was *not going towards the gate*.

"Not a bit of it," cried Dorothy Dayrell. "He's changed his mind about that. See! He heads his horse at the palings! Going to take them? He is in troth! High – over! There's a leap worth looking at!"

And the fair speaker clapped her pretty hands in admiration of the feat.

There was one other who beheld it with an admiration, which, though silent, was not less enthusiastic. The joy that had shone sparkling in the eyes of Marion Wade, as soon as the strange horseman appeared in sight, was now heightened to an expression of proud triumph.

"Who is he?" asked half a score of voices, as the bold horseman cleared the enclosure.

"It is he – the cavalier we have just been speaking of," answered Walter, hurrying away to receive his guest, who was now coming on at an easy gallop towards the camp.

"*The black horseman! – the black horseman*!" was the cry that rose up from the crowd; while the rustics rushed up to the top of the moat to give the new comer a welcome.

"*The black horseman! huzza*!" proclaimed a voice, with that peculiar intonation that suggests a general cheer – which was given, as the cavalier, riding into their midst, drew his steed to a stand.

"*They* know him, at least," remarked the fair Dayrell, with a toss of her aristocratic head. "How popular he appears to be! Can any one explain it?"

"It's always the way with *new* people," said a sarcastic gentleman who stood near, "especially when they make their *débût* a little mysteriously. The rustic has a wonderful relish for the unknown."

Marion stood silent. Her eye sparkled with pride, on beholding the homage paid to her own heart's hero. The sneering interrogatories of Dorothy Dayrell she answered only in thought.

"Grand and noble!" was her reflection. "That is the secret of his popularity. Ah! the instincts of the people rarely err in their choice. He is true to *them*. No wonder they greet him as their God!"

For Marion, herself, a sweet triumph was in store.

The curiosity of the crowd, that had collected on the arrival of the black horseman, was passing away. The people had returned to their sports; or, with admiring looks, were following the famous steed to his stand under the trees. From an instinct of delicacy, peculiar to the country people, they had abandoned the cavalier to the companionship of his proper host – who was now conducting him towards the promised presentation.

They had arrived within a few paces of the spot where Marion was standing. Her face was averted: as if she knew not who was advancing. But her heart told her he was near. So, too, the whisperings of those who stood around. She dared not turn towards him. She dreaded to encounter his eye, lest it might look slightingly upon her.

That studied inattention could not continue. She looked towards him at last. Her gaze became fixed, not upon his face, but, upon an object which appeared conspicuous upon the brow of his beaver —*a white gauntlet*!

Joy supreme! Words could not have spoken plainer. The token had been taken up, and treasured. Love's challenge had been accepted!

Volume One – Chapter Sixteen

A glove, a ribbon, a lock of hair, in the hat of a gentleman, was but the common affectation of the cavalier times; and only proclaimed its wearer the recipient of some fair lady's favour. There were many young gallants on the ground, who bore such adornments; and therefore no one took any notice of the token in the hat of Henry Holtspur – excepting those for whom it had a particular interest.

There were two who felt this interest; though from different motives. They were Marion Wade, and Lora Lovelace. Marion identified the glove with a thrill of joy; and yet the moment after she felt fear. Why? She feared it *might be* identified by others. Lora saw it with surprise. Why? Because it *was* identified. At the first glance Lora had recognised the gauntlet; and knew it to have belonged to her cousin.

It was just this, that the latter had been dreading. She feared not its being recognised by any one else – not even by her father. She knew the good knight had more important matters upon his mind, and could not have told one of her gloves from another. But far different was it with her cousin; who having a more intelligent discrimination in such trifles, would be likely, just then, to exercise it.

Marion's fears were fulfilled. She perceived from Lora's looks that the gauntlet – cruel and conspicuous tell-tale – was under her eye and in her thoughts.

"It is yours, Marion!" whispered the latter, pointing towards the plumed hat of the cavalier, and looking up, with an air more affirmative than enquiring.

"Mine! what, Lora? Yonder black beaver and plumes? What have I to do with them?"

"Ah! Marion, you mock me. Look under the plumes. What see you there?"

"Something that looks like a lady's glove. Is it one, I wonder?"

"It is, Marion."

"So it is, in troth! This strange gentleman must have a mistress, then. Who would have thought of it?"

"It is yours, cousin."

"Mine? My glove – do you mean? You are jesting, little Lora?"

"It is you who jest, Marion. Did you not tell me that you had lost your glove?"

"I did. I dropped it. I must have dropped it – somewhere."

"Then the gentleman must have *picked it up*?" rejoined Lora, with significant emphasis.

"But, dear cousin; do you really think yonder gauntlet is mine?"

"O Marion, Marion! *you know it is yours*?"

Lora spoke half upbraidingly.

"How do you know you are not wronging me?" rejoined Marion, in an evasive tone. "Let me take a good look at it. Aha! My word, Lora, I think you are right. It does appear, as if it were my gauntlet – at least it is very like the one I lost the other day, when out a-hawking; and for the want of which my poor skin got so sadly scratched. It's wonderfully like my glove!"

"Yes; so like, that it is the same."

"If so, how came it yonder?" inquired Marion, with an air of apparent perplexity.

"Ah, how?" repeated Lora.

"He must have found it in the forest?"

"It is very impudent of him to be wearing it then."

"Very; indeed, very."

"Suppose any one should recognise it as yours? Suppose uncle should do so?"

"There is no fear of that," interrupted Marion. "I have worn these gloves only twice. You are the only one who has seen them on my hands. Father does not know them. You won't tell him, Lora?"

"Why should I not?"

"Because – because – it may lead to trouble. May be this strange gentleman has no idea to whom the glove has belonged. He has picked it up on the road somewhere; and stuck it in his hat – out of caprice, or conceit. I've heard many such favours are borne with no better authority. Let him keep it, and wear it – if it so please him. I care not – so long as he don't know whose it is. Don't you say anything about it to any one. If father should know, or Walter – ah! Walter, young as he is, would insist upon fighting with him; and I have no doubt that this *black horseman* would be a very dangerous antagonist."

"Oh! Marion," cried Lora, alarmed at the very thought of such a contingency. "I shall not mention it – nor you. Do not for the world! Let him keep the glove, however dishonourably he may have come to it. I care not, dear cousin – so long as it does not compromise *you*."

"No fear of that," muttered Marion, in a confident tone, apparently happy at having so easily escaped from a dilemma she had been dreading.

The whispered conversation of the cousins was at this moment interrupted by the approach of Walter, conducting the cavalier into the midst of the distinguished circle.

The youth performed his office of introducer with true courtly grace, keeping his promise to all; and in a few seconds Henry Holtspur had added many new names to the list of his acquaintances.

It is no easy part to play – and play gracefully – that of being conspicuously presented; but the same courage that had distinguished the cavalier in his encounter with Garth and his footpads, was again exhibited in that more imposing – perhaps more dangerous – presence.

The battery of bright eyes seemed but little to embarrass him; and he returned the salutations of the circle with that modest confidence, which is a sure test of the true gentleman.

It was only when being presented to the last individual of the group – strange that Marion Wade should be the last – it was only then, that aught might have been observed beyond the ceremonious formality of an introduction. Then, however, a close observer might have detected an interchange of glances that expressed something more than courtesy; though so quickly and stealthily given, as to escape the observation of all. No one seemed to suspect that Marion Wade and Henry Holtspur had ever met before; and yet ofttimes had they met – ofttimes looked into each other's eyes – had done everything but speak!

How Marion had longed to listen to that voice, that now uttered in soft, earnest tones, sounded in her ears, like some sweet music!

And yet it spoke not in the language of love. There was no opportunity for this. They were surrounded by watchful eyes, and ears eagerly bent to catch every word passing between them. Not a sentiment of that tender passion, which both were eager to pour forth – not a syllable of it could be exchanged between them.

Under such constraint, the converse of lovers is far from pleasant. It even becomes irksome; and scarce did either regret the occurrence of an incident, which, at that moment, engaging the attention of the crowd, relieved them from their mutual embarrassment.

Volume One – Chapter Seventeen

The incident, thus opportunely interfering, was the arrival upon the ground of a party of *morris dancers*, who, having finished their rehearsal outside the limits of the camp, now entered, and commenced their performance in front of the elevated moat – upon which Sir Marmaduke and his friends had placed themselves, in order to obtain a better view of the spectacle.

The dancers were of both sexes – maidens and men – the former dressed in gay bodice and kirtle; the latter in their shirt sleeves, clean washed for the occasion – their arms and limbs banded with bright ribbons; bells suspended from their garters; and other adornments in true *Morisco* fashion.

There were some among them wearing character dresses: one representing the bold outlaw Robin Hood; another his trusty lieutenant, Little John; a third the jolly Friar Tuck, and so forth.

There were several of the girls also in character costumes. “Maid Marian,” the “Queen of the May,” and other popular personages of the rural fancy, were personified.

The morris dancers soon became the centre of general attraction. The humbler guests of Sir Marmaduke – having partaken of the cheer which he had so liberally provided for them – had returned into the camp; and now stood clustered around the group of Terpsichoreans, with faces expressing the liveliest delight.

Balloons, bowls, wrestling, and single-stick were for the time forsaken: for the morris dance was tacitly understood, and expected, to be the chief attraction of the day.

It is true, that only peasant girls were engaged in it; but among these was more than one remarkable for a fine figure and comely face – qualities by no means rare in the cottage-homes of the Chilterns.

Two were especially signalised for their good looks – the representatives of Maid Marian and the Queen of the May – the former a dark brunette of the gipsy type – while the queen was a contrasting *blonde*, with hazel eyes, and hair of flaxen hue.

Many a young peasant among their partners in the dance – and also in the circle of spectators – watched the movements of these rustic belles with interested eyes. Ay, and more than one cavalier might have been observed casting sly glances towards Maid Marian, and the Queen of the May.

While those were bestowing their praises upon the peasant girls, in stereotyped phrases of gallantry, some of the stately dames standing around might have found cause to be jealous; and some *were* so.

Was Marion Wade among the number?

Alas! it was even so. New as the feeling was, and slight the incident that called it forth, that fell passion had sprung up within her heart. It was the first time it had been touched with such a sting: for it was her first love, and too recent to have met with a reverse. A pang never felt before, she scarce comprehended its nature. She only knew its cause. Holtspur was standing in the front rank of spectators – close to the ring in which the morris dancers were moving. As the beautiful Bet Dancey – who represented Maid Marian – went whirling voluptuously through the figures of the dance, her dark gipsy eyes, gleaming with amorous excitement, seemed constantly turned upon him. Marion Wade could not fail to observe the glance: for it was recklessly given. It was not this, however, that caused that pain to spring up within her bosom. The forest maiden might have gazed all day long upon the face of Henry Holtspur, without exciting the jealousy of the lady – had her gaze failed to elicit a return. But once, as the latter turned quickly towards him, she fancied she saw the glance of the girl given back, and the passionate thought reciprocated!

A peculiar pang, never felt before, like some poisoned dart, pierced to the very core of her heart – almost causing her to cry out. In the rustic belle she recognised a rival!

The pain was not the less poignant, from its being her first experience of it. On the contrary, it was, perhaps, more so; and from that moment Marion Wade stood, cowed and cowering, with

blanched brow – her blue eye steadily fixed upon the countenance of Henry Holtspur – watching with keen anxiety every movement of his features.

The dark doubt that had arisen in her mind was not to be resolved in that hour. Scarce had she entered upon her anxious surveillance when an incident arose, causing the morris dance to be suddenly interrupted.

Amidst the shouts, laughter, and cheering that accompanied the spectacle, only a few who had strayed outside the enclosure of the camp, caught the first whisperings of a strange, and to them, inexplicable sound. It appeared to proceed from some part of the road – outside the main entrance of the camp; and resembled a continued tinkling of steel implements, mingled with the hoof-strokes of a multitude of horses – not going at will, but ridden with that cadenced step that betokens the passage of a squadron of cavalry.

They who first heard it, had scarce time to make this observation – much less to communicate their thoughts to the people inside the camp – when another sound reached their ears – equally significant of the movement of mounted men. It was the call of a cavalry bugle commanding the "Halt."

At the same instant the hoof-strokes ceased to be heard; and, as the last notes of the bugle died away in the distant woods, there was an interim of profound silence, broken only by the soft cooing of the wood-quest, or the shriller piping of the thrush.

Equally within the camp was the silence complete. The cheers had been checked, and the laughter subdued, at that unusual sound. The ears of all were bent to listen for its repetition; while all eyes were turned in the direction whence it appeared to have proceeded.

There was something ominous in the sudden interruption of the sports, by a sound unexpected, as it was ill understood; and some faces, but the moment before beaming with joy, assumed a serious aspect.

"Soldiers!" exclaimed several voices in the same breath; while the crowd, forsaking the spectacle of the morris dance, rushed up to the top of the moat, and stood listening as before.

Once more came the clear tones of the cavalry trumpet, this time directing the "Forward"; and, before the signal had ceased to echo over the undulations of the park, the first files of a squadron of cuirassiers were seen passing between the massive piers of the main entrance, and advancing along the drive that led towards the mansion.

File followed file in regular order – each horseman, as he debouched from under the shadow of the trees, appearing to become a-blaze through the sudden flashing of the sunbeams upon the plates of his polished armour.

As the troop, riding by two's, had half advanced into the open ground, and still continued advancing, it presented the appearance of some gigantic snake gliding in through the gateway – the steel armour representing its scales, and the glittering files answering to the vertebrae of the reptile.

When all had ridden inside, and commenced winding up the slope that conducted to the dwelling, still more perfect was this resemblance to some huge serpent – beautiful but dangerous – crawling slowly on to the destruction of its victim.

"*The cuirassiers of the king*!"

There were many in the camp who needed not this announcement to make known to them the character of the new comers. The cuirass covering the buff doublet – the steel cap and gorget – the cuisses on the thighs – the pauldrons protecting the shoulders – the rear and vam-braces on the arms – all marked the mailed costume of the cuirassier; while the royal colours, carried in front by the cornet of the troop, proclaimed them the cuirassiers of the king.

By the side of this officer rode another, whose elegant equipments and splendidly caparisoned horse announced him to be the officer in command – the captain.

"The cuirassiers of the king!" What wanted they in the park of Sir Marmaduke Wade? Or what was their business at his mansion: for thither were they directing their march?

This question was put by more than one pair of lips; but by none less capable of answering it than those of Sir Marmaduke himself.

The spectacle of the morris dance had been altogether abandoned. Both actors and spectators had rushed promiscuously towards the moat – on that side fronting to the park – and having taken stand upon its crest, were uttering exclamations of astonishment, or exchanging interrogatories about this new interlude not mentioned in the programme of the entertainments.

At this moment the bugle once more brayed out the "Halt"; and, in obedience to the signal, the cuirassiers again reined up.

As by this the head of the troop had arrived opposite to the old camp – and was at no great distance from it – some words that passed between the two officers, could be heard distinctly by the people standing upon the moat.

"I say, Stubbs," called out the captain, spurring a length or two out from the troop, and pointing towards the camp, "What are those rustics doing up yonder? Can you guess?"

"Haven't the most distant idea," answered the individual addressed.

"They appear to be in their holiday toggery – best bibs and tuckers. Is't a Whitsun-ale or a May-making?"

"Can't be either," rejoined Stubbs. "Isn't the season. No, by Ged!"

"By the smock of Venus! there appear to be some pretty petticoats among them? Mayn't be such dull quarters after all."

"No, by Ged! Anything but dull, I should say."

"Ride within speaking distance; and ask them, what the devil they are doing."

The cornet, thus commanded, clapped spurs to his horse; and, after galloping within fifty paces of the fosse, pulled up.

"What the devil are you doing?" cried he, literally delivering the order with which he had been entrusted.

Of course to such a rude interrogatory, neither Sir Marmaduke, nor any of those standing around him, vouchsafed response. Some of the common people in the crowd, however, called out – "We're merry-making. It's a fête – a birthday celebration."

"Oh! that's it," muttered the cornet, turning and riding back to communicate the intelligence to his superior officer.

"Let's go up, and make their acquaintance," said the latter, as Stubbs delivered his report. "We shall reconnoitre these rustic beauties of Bucks, giving them the advantage of their holiday habiliments. What say you, Stubbs?"

"Agreeable," was the laconic reply of the cornet.

"*Allons*! as they say in France. We may find something up yonder worth climbing the hill for. As they also say in France, *nous verrons*!"

Ordering the troopers to dismount, and stand by their horses – their own being given to a brace of grooms – the two officers, in full armour as they were, commenced ascending the slope that led to the Saxon encampment.

Volume One – Chapter Eighteen

"So, good, people!" said Scarthe, as soon as he and his companion had entered within the enclosure, "holding holiday are you? An admirable idea in such fine weather – with the azure sky over your heads, and the green trees before your faces. Pray don't let us interrupt your Arcadian enjoyment. Go on with the sports! I hope you have no objection to our becoming spectators?"

"No! no!" cried several voices in response, "you are welcome, sirs! you are welcome!"

Having thus spoken their permission, the people once more dispersed themselves over the ground; while the two officers, arm in arm, commenced strolling through the encampment – followed by a crowd of the lower class of peasants, who continued to gratify their curiosity by gazing upon the steel-clad strangers.

Sir Marmaduke and his friends had returned to their former stand – upon the elevated crest of the moat, and at some distance from the causeway, where the officers had entered. The latter saunteringly proceeded in that direction; freely flinging their jests among the crowd who accompanied them; and now and then exchanging phrases of no very gentle meaning, with such of the peasant girls as chanced to stray across their path.

The host of the fête had resolved not to offer the intruders a single word of welcome. The rude demand made by the comet, coupled with the coarse dialogue between the two officers – part of which he had overheard – had determined Sir Marmaduke to take no notice of them, until they should of themselves declare their errand.

He had ordered the morris dance to be resumed. In front of where he stood the dancers had reformed their figures; and, with streaming ribbons and ringing bells, were again tripping it over the turf.

"By the toes of Terpsichore, a morris dance!" exclaimed the captain of cuirassiers, as he came near enough to recognise the costume and measure. "An age since I have seen one!"

"Never saw one in my life," rejoined Stubbs; "except on the stage. Is it the same?"

No doubt Stubbs spoke the truth. He had been born in the ward of Cheap, and brought up within the sound of Bow-bells.

"Not quite the same," drawled the captain, "though something like – if I remember aright. Let's forward, and have a squint at it."

Hastening their steps a little, the two officers soon arrived on the edge of the circle; and without taking any notice of the "people of quality," who were stationed upon the platform above, they commenced flinging free jibes among the dancers.

Some of these made answer with spirit – especially Little John and the Jolly Friar, who chanced to be fellows of a witty turn; and who in their own rude fashion gave back to the two intruders full value for what they received.

Bold Robin – who appeared rather a surly representative of Sherwood's hero – bore their sallies with an indifferent grace – more especially on perceiving that the eyes of the cuirassier captain became lit up with a peculiar fire, while following Maid Marian through the mazes of the dance.

But the heart of the pseudo-outlaw was destined to be further wrung. A climax was at hand. As Marian came to the close of one of her grandest *pas*, the movement had inadvertently brought her close to the spot where the cuirassier captain was standing.

"Bravo! beautiful Marian!" cried the latter, bending towards her, and clasping her rudely around the waist. "Allow a thirsty soldier to drink nectar from those juicy lips of thine."

And without finishing the speech, or waiting for her consent – which he knew would be refused – he protruded his lips through the visor of his helmet, till they came in contact with those of the girl.

A blow from a clenched feminine fist, received right in his face, neither disconcerted nor angered the daring libertine; who answered it by a loud reckless laugh, in which he was joined by his cornet, and chorussed by some of the less sentimental of the spectators.

There were others who did not seem inclined to treat the affair in this jocular fashion.

Cries of "Shame!" "Pitch into him!" "Gie it him, Robin!" were heard among the crowd; and angry faces could be seen mingled with the merry ones.

The idol of England's peasantry needed not such stimulus to stir him to action. Stung by jealousy, and the insult offered to his sweetheart, he sprang forward; and, raising his crossbow – the only weapon he carried – high overhead, he brought it down with a "thwack" upon the helmet of the cuirassier captain, which caused the officer to stagger some paces backward ere he could recover himself.

"Take that, dang thee!" shouted Robin, as he delivered the blow. "Take that; an' keep thy scurvy kisses to thyself."

"Low-born peasant!" cried the cuirassier, his face turning purple as he spoke, "if thou wert worthy a sword, I'd spit thee like a red-herring. Keep off, churl, or I may be tempted to take thy life!"

As he uttered this conditional threat, he drew his sword; and stood with the blade pointing towards the breast of bold Robin.

There was an interval of profound silence. It was terminated by a voice among the crowd crying out: – "Yonder comes the man that'll punish him!"

All eyes were turned towards the elevated platform, on which stood the "people of quality." There was a commotion among the cavaliers. One, who had separated from the rest, was seen hurrying down the sloping side of the moat, and making direct for the scene of the contention.

He had only a dozen steps to go; and, before either the pseudo-outlaw of Sherwood-forest, and his mailed adversary, could change their relative positions, he had glided in between them.

The first intimation the cuirassier had of a true antagonist, was, when a bright sword-blade rasped against his own, striking sparks of fire from the steel; and he beheld standing in front of him, no longer a "low-born peasant," clad in Kendal Green, but a cavalier in laced doublet, elegantly attired as himself, and equally as determined.

This new climax silenced the spectators, as suddenly, as if the wand of an enchanter had turned them into stone; and it was not till after some seconds had elapsed that murmurs of applause rose round the ring, coupled with that popular cry, "*Huzza for the black horseman*!"

For a moment the captain of cuirassiers seemed awed into silence. Only for a moment, and only by the suddenness of the encounter. Swaggerer as he may have been, Scarthe was no coward; and under the circumstances even a coward must have shown courage. Though still under the influence of a partial intoxication, he knew that bright eyes were upon him; he knew that high-born dames were standing within ten paces of the spot; and, though hitherto, for reasons of his own, pretending to ignore their presence, he knew they had been spectators of all that had passed. He had no intention, therefore, of showing the white feather.

Perhaps it was the individual, who had thus presented himself, as much as his sudden appearance, that held him for the moment speechless: for in the antagonist before him, Scarthe recognised the cavalier, who in front of the roadside inn had daringly drunk —

"To the People!"

The souvenir of this insult, added to this new defiance, furnished a double stimulus to his resentment – which at length found expression in words.

"You it is, disloyal knave? You!"

"Disloyal or not," calmly returned the cavalier, "I demand reparation for the slight you have offered to this respectable assemblage. Your free fashions may do for Flanders – where I presume you've been practising them – but I must teach you to salute the fair maidens of England in a different style."

"And who are you, who propose to give the lesson?"

"No *low-born peasant*, Captain Richard Scarthe! Don't fancy you can screen yourself behind that coward's cloak. You must fight, or apologise?"

"Apologise!" shouted the soldier, in a furious voice, "Captain Scarthe apologise! Ha! ha! ha! Hear that Cornet Stubbs? Did you ever know *me* to apologise?"

"Never, by Ged!" muttered Stubbs in reply.

"As you will then," said the cavalier, placing himself in an attitude to commence the combat.

"No, no!" cried Maid Marian, throwing herself in front of Holtspur, as if to screen his body with her own. "You must not, sir. It is not fair. He is in armour, and you, sir – "

"No – it arn't fair!" proclaimed several voices; while at the same moment, a large fierce-looking man, with bushy black beard, was seen pushing his way through the crowd towards the spot occupied by the adversaries.

"Twoant do, Master Henry," cried the bearded man as he came up. "You mustn't risk it that way. I know ye're game for any man on the groun', or in England eyther; but it arn't fair. The sodger captain must peel off them steel plates o' his; and let the fight be a fair 'un. What say ye, meeats?"

This appeal to the bystanders was answered by cries of "Fair play! fair play! The officer must take off his armour!"

"Certainly," said Walter Wade, at this moment coming up. "If these gentlemen are to fight, the conditions must be equal. Of course, Captain Scarthe, you will not object to that?"

"I desire no advantage," rejoined the cuirassier captain. "He may do as he likes; but I shall not lay aside my armour on any account."

"Then your antagonist must arm also," suggested one of the gentlemen, who had accompanied Walter. "The combat cannot go on, till that be arranged."

"No! no!" chimed in several voices, "both should be armed alike."

"Perhaps this gentleman," said one, pointing to the cornet, "will have no objection to lend his for the occasion? That would simplify matters. It appears to be about the right size."

Stubbs looked towards his captain, as much as to say, "Shall I refuse?"

"Let him have it!" said Scarthe, seeing that the proposal could not well be declined.

"He's welcome to it!" said the cornet, who instantly commenced unbuckling.

There were hands enough to assist Henry Holtspur in putting on the defensive harness; and, in a few minutes' time, he was encased in the steel accoutrements of the cornet – cuirass and gorget, pauldrons, cuisses, and braces – all of which fortunately fitted, as if they had been made for him.

The helmet still remained in the hand of one of the attendants – who made a motion towards placing it upon Holtspur's head.

"No!" said the latter, pushing it away. "I prefer wearing my beaver." Then pointing to the trophy set above its brim, he added, "It carries that which will sufficiently protect my head. An English maiden has been insulted, and under the glove of an English maiden shall the insult be rebuked."

"Don't be so confident in the virtue of your pretty trophy," rejoined Scarthe with a sarcastic sneer. "Ere long I shall take that glove from your hat, and stick it on the crest of my helmet. No doubt I shall then have come by it more honestly than you have done."

"Time enough to talk of wearing, when you have won it," quietly retorted the cavalier. "Though, by my troth," added he, returning sneer for sneer, "you should strive hard to obtain it; you stand in need of a trophy to neutralise the loss of your spurs left behind you in the ford of Newburn."

The "ford of Newburn" was Scarthe's especial fiend. He was one of that five thousand horsemen, who under Conway had ignominiously retreated from the Tyne – spreading such a panic throughout the whole English army, as to carry it without stop or stay far into the heart of Yorkshire. Once before had Holtspur flung the disgraceful souvenir in his teeth; and now to be a second time reproached with it, before a crowd of his countrymen, before his own followers – many of whom had by this time entered within the camp – but above all, in presence of that more distinguished

circle of proud and resplendent spectators, standing within earshot, on the moat above – that was the direst insult to which he had ever been subjected. As his antagonist repeated the taunting allusion, his brow already dark, grew visibly darker; while his thin lips whitened, as if the blood had altogether forsaken them.

"Base demagogue!" cried he, hissing the words through his clenched teeth, "your false tongue shall be soon silenced. On the escutcheon of Captain Scarthe there is no stain, save the blood of his enemies, and the enemies of his king. Yours shall be mingled with the rest."

"Come!" cried Holtspur, with an impatient wave of his weapon. "I stand not here for a contest of tongues; in which no doubt the accomplished courtier Scarthe would prove my superior. Our swords are drawn! Are you ready, sir?"

"No," responded Scarthe.

"No?" interrogated his antagonist with a look of surprise. "What – "

"Captain Scarthe is a cuirassier. He fights not a-foot."

"You are the challenged party!" put in Stubbs, "You have the right of choice, captain."

"Our combat then shall be on horseback."

"Thanks for the favour, gentlemen!" responded Holtspur, with a pleased look, "My own wish exactly; though I had scarce hoped to obtain it. You have said the word – we fight on horseback."

"My horse!" shouted Scarthe, turning to one of his troopers. "Bring him up; and let the ground he cleared of this rabble."

There was no necessity for the order last issued. As soon as it had become known, that the combat was to be fought on horseback, the people scattered on all sides – rushing towards the crest of the moat, and there taking their stand – most of them delighted at the prospect of witnessing a spectacle, which, even in those chivalrous times, was of uncommon occurrence.

Volume One – Chapter Nineteen

From the commanding eminence, on which were clustered the "quality folks," the preparations had been watched with a vivid interest, and with emotions varying in kind.

"Splendid!" exclaimed Dorothy Dayrell, as the sword-blades were seen clashing together. "Beats the morris dancers all to bits! Just what I like! One of those little interludes not mentioned in the programme of the entertainment. Surely we're going to see a fight?"

Lora Lovelace trembled, as she listened to these speeches.

"Oh, Dorothy Dayrell!" said she, turning upon the latter an upbraiding look, "'Tis too serious for jesting. You do not mean it?"

"But I do mean it, Mistress Lovelace. I'm not jesting. Not a bit of it. I'm quite in earnest, I assure you."

"Surely you would not wish to see blood spilled?"

"And why not? What care I, so long as it isn't my own blood; or that of one of my friends. Ha! ha! ha! What are either of these fellows to you, or me? I know neither. If they're angry with each other, let them fight it out. Foh-poh! They may *kill* one another, for aught I care."

"Wicked woman!" thought Lora, without making rejoinder.

Marion Wade overheard the unfeeling utterances; but she was too much occupied with what was passing on the plain below, to give heed to them. That incipient suspicion, though still unsatisfied, was not troubling her now. It had given place to a feeling of apprehension, for the safety of him who had been its object.

"My God!" she murmured in soliloquy, her hands clasped over her bosom – the slender white fingers desperately entwining each other. "If he should be killed! Walter! dear Walter!" she cried, earnestly appealing to her brother, "Go down, and stop it! Tell him – tell them they must not fight. O father, *you* will not permit it?"

"Perhaps I may not be able to hinder them," said Walter, springing out from among the circle of his acquaintances. "But I shall go down. You will not object, father? Mr Holtspur is alone, and may stand in need of a friend."

"Go, my son!" said Sir Marmaduke, pleased at the spirit his son was displaying. "It matters not who, or what, he be. He is our guest, and has been your protector. If they are determined on fighting, see that he be shown fair play."

"Never fear, father!" rejoined Walter, hurrying down the slope. "And if that drunken cornet dare to interfere," continued he, half speaking to himself – "I'll give *him* a taste of *my* temper, very different from what he had last night."

As he gave utterance to this threat, the ex-courtier passed through the crowd, followed by several other gentlemen; who, from different motives, were also hastening towards the scene of contention.

"Come, Mistress Marion Wade!" whispered Dorothy, in a significant way. "It is not your wont to be thus tender-hearted. What is it to us, whether they fight or no? It isn't *your* quarrel. This elegant cavalier, who seems to set everybody beside themselves, is not *your* champion, is he? If any one has reason to be interested in his fate, by my trow, I should say it was the Maid Marian —*alias* Bet Dancey. And *certes*, she does seem to take interest in him. See! What's she doing now, the modest creature? By my word, I believe the wench is about to throw herself upon his breast, and embrace him!"

These words entered the ears of Marion Wade with stinging effect. Suddenly turning she looked down upon the sea of faces, that had thickened, and was swerving around the two men; who were expected soon to become engaged in deadly strife. Many of the cuirassiers had arrived upon the ground, and their steel armour now glittered conspicuously among the more sombre vestments of the civilian spectators.

Marion took no note of these; nor of aught else, save the half score figures that occupied the centre of the ring. Scarthe and his cornet, Henry Holtspur, Robin Hood, Little John, and the Friar were there; and there, too, was Maid Marian! What was *she* doing in the midst of the men? She had thrown herself in front of the cavalier – between him and his adversary. Her hands were upraised – one of them actually resting upon Holtspur's shoulder! She appeared to be speaking in earnest appeal – as if dissuading him from the combat!

"In what way could the daughter of Dick Dancey be interested in the actions of Henry Holtspur?"

The question came quickly before the mind of Marion Wade, though it rose not to her lips.

"Bravo!" cried Dorothy Dayrell, as she saw that the cavalier was being equipped. "It's going to go on! A combat in full armour! Won't that be fine? It reminds one of the good old times of the troubadours!"

"O Dorothy!" said Lora, "to be merry at such a moment!"

"Hush!" commanded Marion, frantically grasping the jester by the arm, and looking angrily into her eye. "Another word, Mistress Dayrell – another trifling speech – and you and I shall cease to be friends."

"Indeed!" scornfully retorted the latter. "What a misfortune that would be for me!"

Marion made no rejoinder. It was at this moment that Scarthe had flung out his taunt, about the glove in the hat of his antagonist.

Maid Marian heard the speech, and saw the action.

"Whose glove?" muttered she, as a pang passed through her heart.

Marion Wade heard the speech, and saw the action.

"My glove!" muttered she, as a thrill of sweet joy vibrated through her bosom.

The triumphant emotion was but short-lived. It was soon supplanted by a feeling of anxious apprehension, that reached its climax, as the two cavaliers, each bestriding his own steed, spurred their horses towards the centre of the camp – the arena of the intended combat.

With the exception of that made by the horsemen, as they rode trampling over the turf, not a movement could be observed within or around the enclosure of the camp. The dark circle of human forms, that girdled the ground, were as motionless, as if they had been turned into stones; and equally silent – men and women, youths and maidens, all alike absorbed in one common thought – all voicelessly gazing.

The chirrup of a grasshopper could have been heard throughout the encampment.

This silence had only commenced, as the combatants came forth upon the ground, in readiness to enter upon action. While engaged in preparation, the merits of both had been loudly and freely discussed; and bets had been made, as if the camp were a cockpit, and the cavaliers a main of game birds about to be unleashed at each other.

The popular feeling was not all on one side, though the "black horseman" was decidedly the favourite. There was an instinct on the part of the spectators that he was the *people's friend*, and, in those tyrannous times, the phrase had an important signification.

But the crowd was composed of various elements; and there was more than a minority who, despite the daily evidence of royal outrages and wrongs, still tenaciously clung to that, the meanest sentiment that can find home in the human heart – loyalty. I mean *loyalty to a throne*.

In the captain of cuirassiers they saw the representative of that thing they had been accustomed to worship and obey – that mysterious entity, which they had been taught to believe was as necessary to their existence as the bread which they ate, or the beer they drank – a thing ludicrously styled "heaven-descended" – deriving its authority from God himself —*a king*!

Notwithstanding the insult he had put upon them, there were numbers present ready to shout —

"Huzza for the cuirassier captain!"

Notwithstanding his championship of their cause, there were numbers upon the ground ready to vociferate —

“Down with the black horseman!”

All exhibitions of this sort, however, had now ceased; and, in the midst of a profound silence, the mounted champions, having ridden clear of the crowd, advanced towards each other with glances reciprocally expressive of death and determination.

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It was a terrible sight for the soft eye of woman to look upon. The timid Lora Lovelace would not stay; but ran off towards the house, followed by many others. Dorothy Dayrell called after them, jeering at their cowardice!

Marion remained. She could not drag herself from the approaching spectacle, though dreading to behold it. She stood under the dark shadow of a tree; but its darkness could not conceal the wild look of apprehension, with which she regarded the two mailed horsemen moving from opposite sides of the camp, and frowningly approaching one another.

Out rang the clear notes of the cavalry bugle, sounding the "charge." The horses themselves understood the signal, and needed no spurring to prompt their advance.

Both appeared to know the purpose for which they had been brought forth. At the first note, they sprang towards one another – snorting mutual defiance – as if they, like their riders, were closing in mortal combat!

It was altogether a duello with swords. The sword, at that time, was the only weapon of the cuirassier cavalry, excepting their pistols; but by mutual agreement these last were not to be used.

With blades bare, the duellists dashed in full gallop towards each other, Scarthe crying out: "*For the King*;" while Holtspur, with equal energy raised the antagonistic cry: "*For the People*!"

At their first meeting, no wound was given or received. As the steeds swept past each other, the ring of steel could be heard – sword-blades glinting against cuirass and corslet – but neither of the combatants appeared to have obtained any advantage.

Both wheeled almost at the same instant; and again advanced to the charge.

This time the horses came into collision. That of the cuirassier was seen to stagger at the shock; but although, during the momentary suspension of the gallop, the sword-blades of the combatants were busy in mutual cut and thrust, they separated as before, apparently without injury on either side.

The collision, however, had roused the ire both of horses and riders; and, as they met for the third time, the spectators could note in the eyes of the latter the earnest anger of deadly strife.

Again rushed the horses together in a charging gallop, and met with a terrific crash – both weapons and defensive armour colliding at the same instant. The steed of the cuirassier recoiled from the impetus of his more powerful adversary. The black horse swept on unscathed; but as he passed to the rear, the hat of Holtspur was lifted upon the breeze; and fell behind him upon the grass.

Trifling as was the incident, it looked ominous. It was the first that had the appearance of a triumph; and elicited a cheer from the partisans of the cuirassier captain.

It had scarce reached its climax, ere it was drowned by the more sonorous counter-cheer that hailed the performance of the black horseman.

Having wheeled his horse with the rapidity of thought, he rode back; and, spitting his beaver upon the point of his sword, he raised it up from the ground, and once more set it firmly upon his head!

All this was accomplished, before his antagonist could turn to attack him; and the *sang froid* exhibited in the act, along with the graceful equitation, completely restored the confidence of his supporters.

The fourth encounter was final – the last in which the combatants met face to face.

They closed at full gallop; thrust at each other; and then passed on as before.

But Holtspur had now discovered the point in which he was superior to his adversary; and determined to take advantage of it.

The steeds had scarce cleared one another, when that of the cavalier was seen suddenly to stop – reined backward, until his tail lay spread upon the grass. Then turning upon his hind hoofs, as on a pivot, he sprang out in full gallop after the horse of the cuirassier.

The black horseman, waving his sword in the air, gave out a shout of triumph – such as he had erst often uttered in the ears of Indian foemen – while the horse himself, as if conscious of the advantage thus gained, sent forth a shrill neigh, that resembled the scream of a jaguar.

With a glance over his shoulder, Scarthe perceived the approaching danger. By attempting to turn, he would expose himself sideways to the thrust of his adversary's sword.

There was no chance to turn just then. He must make distance to obtain an opportunity. His only hope lay in the fleetness of his steed; and, trusting to this, he sank the spurs deeply, and galloped on.

This new and unexpected manoeuvre had all the appearance of a retreat; and the camp rang with cries of: – "Coward!" "He is conquered!"

"Huzza for the black horseman!"

For a moment Marion Wade forgot her fears. For a moment proud pleasant thoughts swept through her breast. Her bosom rose and fell under the influence of triumphant emotions. Was he not a hero – a conqueror – worthy of that heart she had wholly given him?

She watched every spring of the two steeds. She longed to see the pursuer overtake the pursued. She was not cruel; but she wished it to be over: for the suspense was terrible to endure.

Marion was not to be tortured much longer. The climax was close at hand.

On starting on that tail-on-end chase, the cuirassier Captain had full confidence in his steed. He was a true Arab, possessing all the strength and swiftness of his race.

But one of the same race was after him, stronger and swifter than he. Like an arrow from its bow the steed of the cuirassier shot across the sward. Like another arrow, but one sent with stronger nerve, swept the sable charger in pursuit. Across the camp – out through the cleared causeway – over the open pasture of the park – galloped the two horsemen, as if riding a race. But their blazing armour, outstretched shining blades, angry looks and earnest attitudes – all told of a different intent.

Scarthe had been for some time endeavouring to gain distance, in order to have an opportunity of turning face to his antagonist. With the latter clinging closely behind him, he knew the manoeuvre to be dangerous, if not impossible – without subjecting himself to the thrust of Holtspur's sword. He soon began to perceive another danger – that of being overtaken.

The spectators had discontinued their shouts; and once more a profound silence reigned throughout the camp. It was like the silence that precedes some expected catastrophe – some crisis inevitable.

From the beginning his pursuer had kept constantly gaining upon him. The fore hoofs of the sable charger now appeared at every bound to overlap the hind heels of his own horse. Should the chase continue but a minute longer, he must certainly be overtaken; for the blade of the cavalier was gleaming scarce ten feet behind his back. The climax was near.

"Surrender, or yield up your life!" demanded Holtspur in a determined voice.

"Never!" was the equally determined reply. "Richard Scarthe never surrenders – least of all to – "

"Your blood on your own head, then!" cried the black horseman, at the same instant urging his horse to a final burst of speed.

The latter gave a long leap forward, bringing him side by side with the steed of the cuirassier. At the same instant Holtspur's sword was seen thrust horizontally outwards.

A cry went up from the crowd, who expected next moment to see the cuirassier captain impaled upon that shining blade. The cuirass of the time consisted only of the breast-plate; and the back of the wearer was left unprotected.

Undoubtedly in another instant Scarthe would have received his death wound, but for an accident that saved him. As Holtspur's horse leaped forward the hind heels of the other struck against his off fore leg causing him slightly to swerve, and thus changing the direction of the sword-thrust. It saved the life of Scarthe, though not his limbs: for the blade of his antagonist entering his right

arm, just under the shoulder, passed clear through – striking against the steel rear-brace in front, and sending his own sword shivering into the air.

The cuirassier captain, dismounted by the shock, in another instant lay sprawling upon the grass; while his horse, with trailing bridle, continued his onward gallop, wildly neighing as he went.

"Cry quarter, or die!" shouted the cavalier, flinging himself from his saddle, and with his left hand grasping the cuirassier by the gorget, while in his right he held the threatening blade. "Cry quarter, or die!"

"Hold!" exclaimed Scarthe. "Hold!" he repeated, with the addition of a bitter oath. "This time the chance has been yours. I take quarter."

"Enough," said Holtspur, as he restored his sword to its sheath. Then turning his back upon his vanquished antagonist, he walked silently away.

The spectators descended from their elevated position; and, clustering around the conqueror, vociferated their cheers and congratulations. A girl in a crimson cloak ran up, and kneeling in front, presented him with a bunch of flowers. It was the insulted maiden, who thus gracefully acknowledged her gratitude.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.