Hocking Joseph

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I
THE COMING OF KATHARINE HARCOMB

The history which I propose writing will, I believe, be of value for various reasons. It will clear my name from various aspersions, and it will enable me to explain what, to many, seem events of an extraordinary nature. For I have done nothing which makes me fear the light, neither have I any desire to offer excuses for the actions which shall be here set down. What I have done I have done in good faith, knowing all the time of the probable results which would follow.

Moreover, I think it is well that many of the happenings of the time of which I write should be recorded, for surely the days of my youth were strange days, full of intrigue, full of mystery; and more, they were days in which one of the greatest battles ever known in our country was fought, a battle which had momentous issues in the life of our people.

Not that I am able to give a description of many events which took place. That would be impossible; but as I was drawn, in

spite of myself as it seems to me, to be an actor in many stirring scenes, I have had peculiar opportunities for knowing the truth. In addition to this, I was trained by my father to follow the custom of the times, and to describe in a diary an account of my daily doings. I shall therefore be able, if ever my memory fails me, to refer to the books which have been carefully kept, and thus place a correct account of matters before those who happen to read.

I had a peculiar training even for youths of that period. For from the time of Archbishop Laud to the coming of King Charles II, nearly every family of note took sides in the great struggle through which the nation passed. Either a man was a Royalist or a Parliamentarian, a believer in the supreme and unquestionable rights of the king, or a supporter of the new order of things. There seemed no half-way house wherein a man might rest. Thus the nation was divided into two great camps, and if one was not in one of these camps he was in the other. But I was trained to hold myself aloof from both, and to distrust them equally.

The reason for this can be quickly told. During the great struggle between Cromwell and the king, my father fought against the Ironside General. Indeed, he gave of his substance freely. He impoverished himself to replenish the king's coffers, and he armed his family retainers in order to keep him on the throne. In the early days of the war, moreover, he was an enthusiastic supporter of the king, and trusted in his royal words implicitly. But after the Battle of Naseby, when the king's papers were taken, and it was made known that Charles had deceived on

every hand, my father lost faith in him, and declared he would never trust a king's word again. Not that he threw in his lot with Cromwell, thus following the example of many others. Rather he cut himself adrift from public affairs, and sought to live in seclusion.

But here a difficulty faced him. His resources were much diminished by what he had devoted to the king's cause, and added to this, so much of his property was taken from him in the troublous days which followed, that while he still kept the old home near Epping Forest, he was scarce able to maintain it. He was a country gentleman, bearing an old name, who could barely afford to keep the horse he rode, or the servants who waited at his tables. This (for my father was a very proud man) embittered him much, and caused him to lose faith in friend and foe alike. He despised the king who had deceived both his followers and those who fought against him, and he spoke of the Presbyterians and Independents as a crack-brained and sour-faced crew, who would make the country a place unfit for a gentleman to live in.

"I trust neither of them, my son," he would often say to me. "I gave my blood and my fortune to the king, and he deceived me by lying promises and false statements: as for this Puritan crew, they have robbed me of my possessions until I, who at the time of the Short Parliament was a rich man, have not the means of giving my only son either a good horse to ride, or money to put in his purse."

"I will gain both, father," I said, for in those days I was ardent

and hopeful, believing that everything was possible to a brave heart and a strong arm.

"But how?" cried my father. "The king's cause is dead, even if it would have benefited thee by fighting for it. As for these canting Puritans, no man can gain aught from them, unless he will quote Scripture, and cry 'Down with the Prayer-book.' In truth there is no cause which an honourable man can espouse, and thus carve his way to fortune."

"The opportunity will come some day," I replied confidently.

My father shook his head. "It cannot be," he said. "England is governed by canting hypocrites, and there is not a man in the country whom we can trust. I tell thee Roland, I am sorely grieved for thee. I have no fortune to give thee, neither are there means whereby a man bearing the name of Rashcliffe can honourably win one. Marriage seems impossible. Not one maid do I know, who would wed a penniless lad like thee; by that I mean a maid of family and dowry. I am known among men as penniless Rashcliffe, and such a name makes it impossible for my son to make a suitable marriage."

"But surely there must be means whereby a man may carve his way to fortune?"

"Tell me about them, Roland. Where can we find them? Those who, like I, have been foolish enough to trust the king and fight for his cause are left wellnigh penniless and friendless. We have been deceived, tricked as if by a cunning card-player. I tell you there is no honour among kings. As for the Puritans, could you

play the knave in order to gain their favour? Could you mimic their pious whine, and curse both bishops and Prayer-book?"

"No, I could not," I replied, for although my father had taught me to have no faith in men, he still tried to teach me to be an honourable gentleman.

"I know," he went on, "that many hope for the death of Cromwell. Well, that may happen any day, and then what shall we see? In all probability Oliver will make provision whereby his son shall take his place. But even if he doth not, and Charles were to come back, would such as I be benefited? Would the new king see to it that my estates were restored to me? The new King Charles would be the son of the old King Charles. The new king would be a Stuart, and never again can I trust a Stuart."

"Is there no hope then?" I asked despondently, for the constant repetition of such speeches had made me believe that no man was to be trusted.

"There is no hope except you can get men in your power," replied my father.

"In my power?" I repeated, for I scarce knew what he meant.

"Ay, in your power, Roland. There is a secret in most men's lives. If you can find that secret, you are a force to be reckoned with. You then have the means whereby you can fight your way into position. Look here. Charles Stuart is now in France. Supposing Oliver Cromwell were to die, and the people, tired of Puritan rule, were to welcome him back to the kingdom. Do you think he would remember that I, Philip Rashcliffe, am

impoverished by fighting for his father? If I went to him, and said, 'Sire, I have scarce a horse to ride on, scarce a crown to put in my purse; I have lost all through fighting for your father's throne,' do you think he would cause the Rashcliffe lands to be restored? Nay, he would say, aloud, 'Master Rashcliffe, we will look into this matter, and you may trust us to see that justice shall be done;' but to himself he would say, 'What is there to be gained by doing aught for this man? He is plain and blunt, and I shall gain nought by troubling about him. Besides, there be a hundred others who come with the same tale. Let me to my wine.' Ay, but if Charles discovered that I knew something which affected him deeply, then would he for self-preservation desire to do me justice."

"But that would be blackmailing," I cried.

"Nay, it would not; it would be simply using the means at my disposal for getting back my own."

"Know you of aught, that you say this?" I asked, at which my father shook his head.

It will be seen from this that I was taught to trust no man or party. Moreover, as the years went by my father influenced me by his own desponding views, so that I, unlike most youths, felt no ardour for any cause, and believed but little in any man. As to women, I knew nothing of them, for, besides our kitchen wenches and servant maids, scarcely a woman ever entered Rashcliffe Manor. My father desired no company, and even if he had so desired, he was too poor to give hospitality in a way

befitting his station. As for myself I was too proud to seek acquaintance among those of lower degree than myself, while those of my own rank had, through my father's seclusion, shut their doors against his son. Thus I knew nought of women. I believed that, poor as I was, no woman of name and fortune would deign to notice me, and it was not for my father's son to go unbidden to the houses of those who still retained their wealth.

Presently Oliver Cromwell died, and I thought my father seemed to be possessed of new hope; but when Richard, his son, was chosen Lord Protector in his place, he simply shrugged his shoulders like a Frenchman, and said that the country was not yet tired of psalm-singing. During the months that followed he went often to London, in order, as he said, to find out what Monk and Lambert were doing, and when at length Richard Cromwell ceased to be Lord Protector, he grimly remarked that we "should soon see gay doings."

A little later the whole country was in a state of excitement. Charles was recalled to England, the Royalists were jubilant, while the Puritans looked forward with dread to the dark days which they felt sure were near at hand.

"We will go to meet the king," cried my father.

"What!" I cried in astonishment, for my father had declared that he would never again have aught to do with a Stuart.

"Ay, we will go and meet him, Roland. You and I will ride together. There are still two good horses left in the stables, and we will dress ourselves in a way befitting gentlemen, and we will

go to Dover, and shout 'God save the King!' with the rest of the crowd."

"But why?" I asked, for I felt no love for the man whom the people were already calling "His Gracious Majesty King Charles II, the Lord's Anointed One."

"Ay, and that you shall know before the sun goes down," he replied.

I looked at him in astonishment, for he had cast off the old look of hopelessness and indifference so common to him, and seemed to believe that brighter days were coming.

"Do you believe in the new king?" I asked.

"I believe a Stuart!" he replied, with scorn. "Nay, not so my son."

"Men speak of him as a man with an open and generous nature," I suggested.

"Ay, and I knew him before he had to fly from the country," he replied. "I tell you he is a Stuart. He hath the vices of both his father and his grandfather. He will lie and deceive like Charles his father, and he will turn his Court into a pigsty, like his grandfather James. In six months from now Whitehall will be filled with swashbucklers and wine-bibbers. Bad men and worse women will rule the country. God only knows what will become of the Puritans, in spite of his fair promises. But what of that? We will go and meet him!"

"But you will gain nought."

"Ay, I will, but there will be much to do first."

"Much to do!"

"Ay, much for thee to do, Roland. I have hopes that the Rashcliffe lands will be mine again, and that my son will hold up his head among the highest."

"You think you will gain the favour of the king?"

"Nay, but perchance I may gain his fear."

"His fear?"

"Ay, his fear. Or, better still, thou shalt gain his fear."

"But why should the king fear me? I can do nought against him. I have no power."

"Knowledge is power," replied my father.

"But I have no knowledge."

"Nay, but thou shalt be in the way to get it before the sun goes down."

At this I made no reply, but I looked at him in astonishment.

"I do not speak wildly or foolishly," said my father. "I tell thee again thou shalt know something of importance before the sun goes down. And now get on the back of that colt Black Ben, which hath been lately broken to the saddle, and ride him across the park lands yet left to us. Get accustomed to his step, my boy, for when we meet the king, it is my desire that King Charles may take note what a fine horseman you are."

I went to the stables, therefore, and saddled Black Ben, a colt which had been a kind of playmate to me, and which had required very little breaking in order to allow me to ride him. For however he might treat another rider, to me he was gentleness

itself. I was proud of Black Ben, for he was the first horse I ever possessed on which the neighbours cast eyes of envy. Indeed, my father had been offered a good price for him, but although he wanted the money sadly he refused to sell it.

"No," he said, "thou hast a horse at last, Roland, and thou shalt keep it. I will sell some milch cows before Black Ben shall go."

He was a large noble animal, as black as the wing of a raven, and free from spot or blemish of any sort. I had never tested his speed, but I knew that there was not a horse between me and London town that I could not pass if I gave Black Ben rein.

He gave me a whinny as he saw me, and presently rubbed his nose against my sleeve by way of greeting.

"You are going to meet the new king, Black Ben, my boy," I said as I patted him, and again he whinnied as though he understood me.

A few minutes later I was flying across the park on Ben's back. I was at this time nearly twenty-three years of age, and having taken after my father, was not a light man, but he bore me as though I were a feather.

When I reached the park gates I saw old Adam Winkley, who still lived at the cottage and called himself the gatekeeper, although there was no need of his services.

"Ah, Mester Roland," he said as I came up, "I do 'ear as 'ow the new king is comin'."

"Ay, so it is said."

"Well, God bless the king! I be always a king's man, I be. I

be noan for Old Nol's crew. Not but what they can fight. Give Old Nol his due, he've made the furriners see that the English caan't be bait."

"We didn't need Old Nol to make them know that," I replied.

"Well, as to that, Mester Roland, forgive me for not havin' the same opinion as you; but I fought in the wars with your father, and I shall go lame to the end of my days because of it, and I know somethin' of fightin'. This I knaw, the furinners never feared the English so much as they did durin' Old Nol's time. Not that I believed in him. I bean't a young man, but I still like a carouse I do, and I like good ale, and plenty of it, and I say let people enjoy themselves. And I reckon we shall see a change soon. When young Charles do come, we shall no longer have these sour-faced Independents rulin' the roost, and so I say with a full heart, God bless King Charles."

I let the old man talk in this way for old time's sake. He had served our family all his life, and although others had left during our fallen fortunes, he had remained faithful.

"And when do the king come, Mester Roland?"

"Next Tuesday, I have heard, but I am not quite sure."

"Then I shall start to walk to Dover town on Monday morning, so as to be in time to see him land."

"Ah, then I shall see you there. Both my father and I are going."

"I be right glad. I be in hopes that the new king will do your father justice, Master Roland, and that we shall see gay doings at

Rashcliffe again. God save the king, I say."

At this moment my attention was drawn from old Adam by a woman who was walking towards my father's house. As far as I could judge she was somewhat advanced in years, although she walked with a strong sturdy step. She gave a hasty glance in my direction, and then kept her face steadily towards the house.

"Know you who that is?" I asked of Adam.

"No!" replied old Adam; "it can't be she?"

"Can't be who?"

"Can't be Katharine Harcomb; and yet she has her walk. But Katharine is dead. I've heard it many a time." This he said as though he were talking to himself rather than to me.

"But who is Katharine Harcomb? I never heard her name."

"No, she left Rashcliffe before you were born, and yet she was maid to your mother. She was a gay one, was Katharine. What Katharine didn't know wasn't worth finding out. Ay, and a handsome maid she was too. As for darin', there was nothing she wouldn't do. One day she dressed in your mother's fine clothes and the other servants didn't know her, she looked such a grand lady. They all curtsied to her, thinking she was some visitor who had come unbeknowing to them. Ay, Katharine could act the lady, she could. Why, it is said the young king fell in love with her when he was Prince Charles, but of that I'll say nothing. Still, this woman can't be she, although she's got her look and her walk. Katharine died years ago – there can be no doubt about that."

By this time the woman was out of sight, while I turned

my horse's face towards London, and rode a few miles in that direction before returning to the house.

It was drawing towards evening when I got back, and on entering the house I found that my father had given orders that he should be informed of my return.

"Roland," he said when at length I went to him, "will you come with me into the library?"

"Yes," I said, wondering at his grave demeanour.

When I entered the library I almost gave a start, for in the room was the woman I had seen in the park. She looked up at me, and there was, as I thought, a bold and defiant expression in her eyes. She did not look like a woman of birth and breeding, and yet no one would regard her as a common serving woman. She possessed an air approaching gentility, and although her clothes were much worn, they were of good material.

"More mother than father," I heard her say.

I looked at her awkwardly, for I knew not how to address her, and although I lifted my hat and bowed as I would to a lady of my own degree, I did so constrainedly, not feeling comfortable in her presence.

"This is Mistress Katharine Harcomb," said my father. "She dwelt here before you were born."

The woman gave a laugh, which was half-defiant, half amused.

"Ay, I dwelt here before you were born, Master Roland; since then I have been dead, and now I am alive again."

I did not like the woman. Not that she was evil-looking; rather, she must have been very fair to look upon twenty years before, and even now she retained much of the beauty of youth. But her voice was harsh, the lines around her mouth suggested scorn and bitterness, while the strong chin should have belonged to a man rather than to a woman. I could see in a moment that she was not a woman to be trifled with; indeed, she evidently possessed that imperious strength of will like unto that by which Queen Elizabeth made strong men quail before her.

"I pray you to pay good heed to what Mistress Harcomb hath to tell us," said my father, "for it is no light matter concerning which she would speak."

I know not why, but my heart became heavy. I felt sure that the knowledge which my father had spoken of as power to bend the will of kings was somehow associated with this strong imperious looking woman who gazed steadily into my eyes.

CHAPTER II
THE SECRET OF THE BLACK BOX

I must confess to a somewhat strange feeling in my heart when I looked into the woman's face. I felt sure that she was trying to understand the manner of man I was, so that she might make up her mind how far I could be of service to her. For, from the very first I could not think of her as a former serving woman of my mother. Humble of birth she might be, but I was very sure that her thoughts were other than those of a serving woman, and that she had mixed herself up with affairs of importance. Her great dark searching eyes, her strongly moulded face, her determined mouth all assured me that here was a woman of far-reaching plans, and one who would stop at nothing to carry those plans into effect.

"More mother than father," I heard her murmur again, and then she looked from my father to me as though she were trying to discover the difference between us.

"Well, Katharine," said my father, "you have discovered what you set your heart upon, and which you spoke of when I saw you in St. Paul's Church."

The woman laughed mockingly.

"In less than a month the king will be in England," she said, "and, oh! what a king!" and then she fell to scanning our faces

again.

"The people be already crying, 'God save the king!'" said my father. "Already my old neighbours who fought for Charles I be looking forward to the time when the Puritans will be despoiled like the Egyptians of old, and when they will be rewarded for being faithful to the royalty."

"Rewarded!" said the woman scornfully. "Will the eldest son of Charles I ever reward an honest man? I know him, Master Rashcliffe. He will be the dupe of every knave, the puppet of every hussy in England. He will make promises without end, but he will be too idle to perform them. No honest man will be the better for his return, and no one will have justice unless that justice is forced from him."

"But have you discovered aught?" asked my father. "You know what you promised me. Moreover, when I last saw the dame with whom you had lodgment at the back of Aldersgate Street, she said you had your hand upon the proof."

"And I am not one who makes promises lightly," replied the woman, "neither am I a woman who, having made up her mind, is easily turned aside. Nevertheless, there remaineth much to be done, Master Rashcliffe. The matter is not child's play, and he who meddles with matters which affect the king is in danger of being accused of treason. For Charles Stuart can act to purpose when it suits him. That is why I have not come to you before."

Here again the woman ceased speaking and scanned me closely.

"This son of yours hath never fought in the wars?" she said questioningly.

"Nay," replied my father. "During the first civil war he was too young to bear arms. After that my heart was embittered. I would not have my son uphold the claims of a man who was alike faithless to both enemies and friends. Then, when Charles was beheaded, could I allow my son to fight under Cromwell?"

"He was a brave, strong man," replied the woman.

"Ay, a brave strong man if you will. But not such a man as my son could fight under. Besides, I would not have him mingle with such a crew as this army fashioned under the New Model. Would I have my son become a psalm-singing hypocrite? Would I have him taught to cry 'down with the Prayer Book'? Would I have him made a sour-faced follower of old Nol, learning to make pious speeches in order to gain promotion? No, I had fought under the king's standard, and, although the king betrayed us all, I would not have my son serve under my Lord Protector. Nevertheless, Roland is no weakling, as you see, neither is he a fool. Poor as I have been, I have seen to it that he hath learned something of letters. He can write like a clerk, and can read not only in the English tongue, but in Latin and in French."

"In French?" said the woman eagerly, I thought.

"Ay, in French. Besides without ever having served with the wars, he knows everything of fighting that I could tell him, and as for swordcraft, I doubt if there is a man in London town who could stand against him."

Again the woman looked at me eagerly, and then she broke out like one in anger.

"It is well, Master Rashcliffe, for, mark you, if what I have discovered is true, he will need all his cleverness, all his learning, and all his knowledge of swordcraft. We play for high stakes, Master Rashcliffe – nothing less than the throne of England."

"Ay, I gathered as much," said my father thoughtfully.

"Look you here," went on the woman. "You desire to gain back your estates; you desire, moreover, that your son Roland shall not be a penniless, lackland squire like you. Why, I discovered as I came hither, that for years this manor house hath been little better than a farm kitchen, that such as Nicholas Beel, the blacksmith, who fought for Cromwell, and 'praise be his name, Elijah of the Marsh,' and 'Grace-abounding Reuben,' who used to be one of your hinds, be now fattening on your best farms."

"Ay, it is so," cried my father angrily. "The very kitchen wenches of twenty years ago laugh at me, and call me 'Landless Rashcliffe'."

"And Charles Stuart will never give you back these lands unless he is made," said the woman.

"Ay, ay," said my father, "I know enough of him for that; but to your tale, Katharine Harcomb. Tell me what you know."

"I know that James, the new king's brother, is full of hope that Charles will kill himself by revelry in a year," replied the woman. "I know that he is next heir to the throne. I know that he

is intriguing to get back the Catholic religion to the country, and I know that neither Charles nor James loves either you or yours."

"And yet I fought for their father," said my father.

"Ay, and like the honest man thou art, declared that thou couldst never fight for him again after the contents of his papers which were found on Naseby field were made known," retorted the woman. "I know this, too, that if Charles had gained the victory over Cromwell, thou wouldst have been beheaded for what thou didst say at that time. Mark you, a Stuart never forgets, and never forgives, for all the fair promises that they make. Therefore if ever thou dost get back thine own, and if ever thy son is to be more than a mere yeoman ploughing his own fields – ay, and poor fields at that, for the best have all been taken away – he must be able to force the new king's hand."

"Ay, I know all this," replied my father impatiently, "but let us hear what you have discovered, Katharine; let us know the truth concerning the strange things I have heard."

"It is no use telling of what I know, unless this son of thine be bold enough to make use of it," replied the woman. "I am a girl no longer, Master Rashcliffe; I am not so simple as I was in those days when I was waiting maid to Mistress Rashcliffe. Enough to say that I have found out sufficient to make Charles Stuart, who is even now preparing to come back to England as king, eager not only to restore thy lands, but to give a place of honour to Master Roland here. Ay, but that is not all. The thing which I know to exist must be in our hands, ay, and in our hands in such a way that

we shall be able to make our own bargain with the new king."

"But what is it?"

"It is this. James, Duke of York, is not the next heir to the throne."

"Well, and what of that?"

"This," replied the woman. "You have heard of the Welsh girl, Lucy Walters?"

"Ay, I have hear of her."

"And you have heard of her son, a lad who goes by the name of James Croft?"

"Yes," said my father, "I have heard of him; but it doth not matter."

"Ay, but it doth matter."

"Why?"

"Because he, although Charles Stuart will doubtless deny it, is the next heir to the throne of England."

My father started back in amazement.

"He is Charles' son," continued the woman.

"Ay, but – "

"Charles married Lucy Walters – married her in Holland."

"But the proof, the proof!" cried my father.

"It is this proof of which I come to speak," said Katharine Harcomb. "But answer me this: suppose the proof could be obtained, suppose the box containing the contract of marriage between Charles Stuart and Lucy Walters could be obtained – what then?"

For a time my father was silent. Evidently he regarded the woman's declaration of great import, and I saw that he carefully considered her words.

"Charles would not desire it to be known," he said at length.

"Nay, that he would not," said the woman with a laugh; "but there is more than that, Master Rashcliffe."

"Ay, there is," said my father thoughtfully. "He who could be fortunate enough to possess that marriage contract would be able to make his terms not only with the king, but the king's brother."

"Ah, you begin to see."

"The man who possessed such a secret could stir up civil war in England," said my father; "such a war that might well make men forget the war between Charles I and Cromwell."

"Ay," said the woman; "but what is more to our purpose, Master Rashcliffe, he could make the king restore the Rashcliffe lands, and gain for his son a place in England worthy his name."

"And do others know of this secret, Katharine?" asked my father.

"Yes," replied the woman; "it hath been guessed at by many, but I alone know where the box containing the marriage contract is hidden. It hath cost me much trouble to find out, but at last I have done it."

I looked at the woman as she said this, and I thought there was a furtive look in her eyes.

"And how did you find it out?" asked my father presently.

"Of that more anon," replied Katharine Harcomb. "Enough

to say now that this is the secret I promised to tell you, a secret which should give you the power to make your own terms with the king. All now depends on young Roland here."

"On me!" I cried, speaking for the first time, although, as may be imagined, I listened eagerly to every word which had been spoken.

"Ay, on you," replied the woman, "for that marriage contract is in hiding. It is hidden in a black box,[1] and may be obtained only with difficulty. The question is, Master Roland, will you undertake the work of bringing it hither?"

"How old is the king's son?" I cried, for her story had excited my imagination and appealed to that love for adventure which for a long time had been struggling for expression.

"How old?" repeated the woman; "he is a lad of about eleven years. At present he is with the dowager queen."

"And do you mean that he is the next heir to the English throne?" I cried.

"Ay, that he is," replied the woman; "and the man who can find the marriage contract can go far to be one of the masters of England."

"And if it be not brought to light?" I cried, "then if Charles has no other son, the Duke of York will become king."

"That is not the thing of import," replied the woman; "the

[1] As all students of history know, the story of the black box containing the marriage contract between Charles II and Lucy Walters obtained great credence after the Restoration, indeed, it is probable that belief in its validity had much to do with the Monmouth rebellion at a later date. – J. H.

thing that is of weight is this: the man who hath the secret can make the king obey him."

But this was not the thought which fired my imagination. A great overmastering desire came into my heart to place my hand upon this marriage contract that I might be the means of doing justice to the king's disowned son, and even as she spoke I found myself making plans for going out into the world to unearth this secret. For it must be remembered that I was but a lad of twenty-three, and that up to now, in spite of my many day dreams, I had been kept mewed up in the old manor with my father, knowing but little of what was going on in the great world.

Still, I was not so young but that I saw many difficulties in the way. I reflected that we had only the word of this Katharine Harcomb, who had lived at Rashcliffe Manor many years before, and who, according to belief, had been dead for some time. Where had she been all these years? what were her motives in seeking out this mystery? and more than all, why had she chosen my father and myself as the men to whom she could disclose this momentous secret? Not that these matters troubled me much. I was too much excited by the story of the mystery to weigh well those things which, had I been ten years older, I should have considered carefully. Still, they came into my mind, and I was on the point of putting them to her, when she rose from her chair and placed her hand on my shoulder. I remember even then thinking how tall she was, for as I stood by the fireplace, and she came up to me, her face was level with mine, and I am not a short man.

"Roland Rashcliffe," she said, "will you undertake this thing?"

I looked at my father, who appeared to be pondering deeply.

"Where is it?" I asked.

"Where is what?"

"This black box."

"Before I make known where it is I must have your promise. Nay, Master Roland, look not darkly at me, for this is no light matter. I dare not make known the hiding place until I am assured that you will undertake to go wherever it is, and then alone, and in secret, bring it hither."

The words pleased me, although they raised more questions in my mind. I liked the words "alone and in secret," even although I little understood what they portended.

"How came you to know these things?" I asked.

"I saw the woman called Lucy Walters when she was in England," replied Katharine Harcomb; "I saw her as she was taken to the Tower."

"You saw Lucy Walters!" I cried.

"Ay, I saw her. No wonder Charles Stuart loved her, for a more beautiful woman I never set my eyes on. Ay, poor thing, she was neither wise nor prudent, as she found out afterwards to her cost, but she was the fairest maid to look upon that ever I clapped my eyes on. It is true her first beauty had left her, and at that time she was in sore trouble, for she was on her way to the Tower with soldiers on either side of her; nevertheless, every man fell in love with her as she went. The verse-makers have called her the 'nut-

brown maid,' and well they might, for her hair was the colour of ripe chestnuts when they are picked from the trees in early October. It shone like the dowager queen's diamonds, and hung around her head in great curling locks. Her eyes were brown too, and sparkled like stars; even then roses were upon her cheeks, and she walked like a queen."

"But she was liberated from the Tower," said my father, "and went back to France."

"But not before I saw her, Master Rashcliffe," replied Katharine Harcomb, "and not before she told me that she was Charles Stuart's wedded wife."

"She told you that?"

"Ay, she told me that."

"But did she tell you where the marriage contract was?" asked my father.

"Of that I shall say nothing until I know whether Master Roland here will undertake the work I have spoken of," and again the woman's dark bright eyes scanned my face, as though she saw there an index to the thoughts which possessed my mind.

"Roland," said my father, "I would e'en talk with Katharine Harcomb alone. Do you leave the room, and return in an hour's time."

I did not much like this, for, as may be imagined, I was much interested, and wanted to hear more of what the woman had to tell; but I obeyed my father quickly as every dutiful son should, and went out of the house into the park lands.

The sun had now gone down, but it was not dark neither did I think it would be throughout the whole night. For not only was there a moon, but the sky was clear. Indeed, the time was the middle of May, when the air was clear and the countryside was beauteous beyond words. It is true the roses had not yet appeared, but the trees were wellnigh in full leaf, for the season was early. Even the oaks and the ashes were covered with spring leaves, which I saw shining in the light of the moon. No stars appeared that night, the moon was so bright, and no sound did I hear save the babbling of the trout stream that ran through the park, and now and then the twitter of a bird which settled itself to rest.

I walked along the grass-grown drive which led to the gates, wondering about what the woman Katharine Harcomb had said, and thinking if ever the time would come when carriages would be drawn up to the house as they were in the days before the Long Parliament, and when my old home would be full of gaiety.

"This is a strange happening," I said to myself. "Ever since Richard Cromwell died my father hath spoken of possible change to our fortunes if Charles should come back, not because the king would do aught for us of his own free will, but because we should gain the power to compel him."

And then as I thought of these things, in spite of the way the woman had inspired my fancy by the story of the king's marriage, the whole thing became like old wives' fables, and I was glad that I had not been led to make any promises.

I had barely got in sight of the gate where I had seen old Adam

in the earlier part of the day, when I heard the sound of footsteps. They were not the footsteps of a man: of that I was certain. They were neither firm enough nor heavy enough. Moreover, they were uncertain, and, as I thought, feeble. I stopped and looked along the road, and saw the form of a woman coming towards me.

Bright although the moonlight was, I could not at first make out her age or her station, but as she drew nearer I thought that she was old and poor.

"Whither go you, dame?" I asked as she came up.

"And what is that to you, young master?"

By this time I was able to see that she was bent, and that her clothes were those of one of low degree. I knew by the way she spoke that she was toothless, for her words were not clearly spoken.

"It may be much to me, dame," I replied, "but whether it be or no, I would warn you against going to the house yonder, for the dogs be let loose of a night, and they would make short work of you."

She mumbled some words which I could not understand; then looking up at me, she said, "And who may you be, young master?"

"I am Master Rashcliffe's son," I replied.

At this she gave a start, and scanned me more eagerly than before.

"Ay, ay, I should a' known," I heard her mumble, "I should a' known, for did not Katharine tell me?"

At this I was all ears again, and all eyes too for that matter, for evidently she knew something of the woman who was even then at the house talking with my father.

"Dogs or no dogs, I must e'en go," she said presently.

"Why? is your business of import?" I asked.

"Ay, or I would not have come all the way from St. Paul's Cross to Epping. For that matter I should never have got here did not a man coming hither give me a lift on his cart. But, young master, tell me. Hath a woman come to your father's house this day?"

"What kind of a woman?" I asked.

"A woman who hath forty-five years, but carries them lightly," she replied; "a woman who hath not the attire of a woman of quality, and yet speaketh as if she were; a woman who years ago lived at Rashcliffe Manor."

"And if such a woman hath been there?" I said.

"Then must I go thither."

"But if she hath been there, and is gone?"

"Then lack-a-day, I know not; ay, but even then I must know what she hath told Master Rashcliffe."

"Come with me," I said; "I will take you to the house."

"But is she there?" she asked eagerly.

"Ay, she is there," I replied.

"Then let us go quickly," and although she still stooped low, she walked by my side at a good speed.

A little later I led her into my father's hall, wondering at the

meaning of what was happening, but little dreaming of what lay before me.

CHAPTER III
THE KING'S MARRIAGE CONTRACT

Bidding the woman be seated, and going straight to the room we called the library, I knocked at the door.

"Who is there?" asked my father.

"It is I, Roland."

My father opened the door, and looked at me questioningly. I saw that the woman Katharine Harcomb was standing by the chair on which she had sat during the time I had been in the room; but the hard defiant look in her eyes had gone. Rather I thought I saw fear, almost amounting to terror in them. Evidently my father had been speaking about matters which moved her mightily. She no longer bore the expression of one who would make her own terms, but rather as one who lived under the shadow of a great fear.

"You are back soon Roland," said my father, "it is not an hour since you left us."

"Nay," I replied, "but I met an old woman from St. Paul's Cross who was coming hither, who declared she must see Katharine Harcomb."

The woman gave a start as I spoke.

"Where is she?" she cried, "let me see her without delay."

"Tarry a little," said my father; "tell me more of this, Roland."

So without more ado I told him of my meeting with the dame, and of what had passed between us.

"I would speak to her, I would speak to her alone!" cried Katharine Harcomb, like one bereft of her senses, and she made for the doorway as if to pass me. But my father closed the door quickly and seemed to be deep in thought. A moment later I saw that he had made up his mind.

"Have any of the kitchen wenches seen her?" he asked.

"Nay," I replied. "I myself opened the door, and she is waiting in the hall."

"Then do you bring her here, Roland, and afterward do you leave us again."

I have no doubt I showed my disappointment at this, for I was eager to understand the meaning of it all. My father took but little heed, however, so doing his bidding I went to the hall, where the woman was still sitting.

It was at this time I called to mind that I had not heard her name, so without first telling her to follow me where my father was I said quietly, "What is your name, good dame?"

"Name," she replied, "when Katharine Harcomb knows that Mistress Walters is here she will not keep me waiting."

"That is well," I replied; "will you follow me?" But although I spoke quietly my heart beat quickly, for I felt sure that she was in some way connected with Lucy Walters, whose son, Katharine Harcomb said, was the next heir to the throne of England.

No sooner had the library door opened than I saw the two women exchange glances, but I had no opportunity of noticing more, for my father gave me a look which told me that I must leave them alone, which I did much to my impatience.

I did not go far away, however. It is true I left the house, for cool as the night had become the air seemed stifling, so I stepped on to the grass outside, and began to walk up and down in the light of the window, behind which I knew my father and the two women were. How long I stayed there I know not, but it must have been more than an hour, for I noticed that the moon which stood high in the heavens when I went out had dropped behind the trees. In a sense the time seemed long. To a lad barely twenty-three, to be kept away from the knowledge of a secret which promised to vitally affect his future, was calculated to multiply every minute into five. Nevertheless I had so much to think about, that I thought but little of the time, and that in spite of my impatience. The mystery of the box containing the marriage contract between the new king and Lucy Walters, and the woman's request that I should go on a voyage of discovery kept me wondering so much, that at times I almost forgot that I knew very little of the whole business, and that my father was even then talking about these things with the two women who had in such an unaccountable way entered my life.

The moon had sunk far behind the trees when I was startled by the loud noises of those within the house. A minute later I heard my father's voice.

"Roland, my son."

I entered the house again, and soon found myself in the room where I had left the two women. I could see that something of importance had passed between them. The woman Katharine Harcomb seemed much wrought upon, while in her eyes was a look which might mean anger or terror.

I looked from one to the other questioningly, for I was eager to know what had been said.

"Roland, my son," said my father, "you have long complained of idleness. You will have no need to complain longer."

I did not speak, although many questions came into my mind.

"Ay," cried the old woman, "and what is done must be done quickly and in secret, for remember the Duke of York is already at work. He knows that my grandson will be the lawful heir to the throne, and if he can find the marriage contract, my poor Lucy's child will be kept out of his rights."

"You mean the new king's brother?" I asked, for I was somewhat taken back by the vehemence of the dame's speech.

"Ay, who else?" she replied. "If Charles dies, will he not claim the crown? Already it is said that he speaks of what he will do when he is crowned."

"As to that," I made answer, "are not his chances small? He is but three years younger than the king, and may not live as long. Besides, Charles may marry again."

"He will," cried the dame, "he will, but there will be no children."

"How do you know?" I asked.

"I do know, and that is enough," she replied. "Charles will never have a child which shall be heir to the throne of England save only the son of my daughter Lucy."

I took but little notice of this speech, although the dame uttered it with much warmth. I imagined that in spite of the severe measures which had been taken with witches, and those who professed to foretell the future, she had either consulted some of these people, or was perchance herself a "wise woman." Not that I paid much heed to these things, for my father, although he denied not that some had it in their power to reveal the future, had generally made light of their professions, and had taught me to treat them with scorn.

"Be that as it may," I said, "you have it that the new king married your daughter."

"Ay, I hold to that," she cried, "and poor and humble as I seem to be, I say that I am grandmother to him who should be king of England when his father dies."

"That remains to be proved," I said, for I was eager to get back to the question which had been broached by Katharine Harcomb when first we had met earlier in the evening.

"Ay, that remains," replied the dame, angrily I thought; "and it is by you, Master Roland Rashcliffe, that this is to be done."

"But why have you chosen me?" I asked, for young though I was, ay and eager to undertake any work which meant movement, and romance, I could not help asking why I among all others

should be chosen for this work.

"You shall know some day Roland," said my father. "It is enough for you to know now you have a great work to do, a work which if successfully done will make you a power in England."

"But what is it?" I asked somewhat impatiently, for it seemed to me that I was asked to do something the nature of which was hidden from my eyes.

"To bring hither the marriage contract," he replied.

"Ay, but where is it?"

"It is in England," replied Katharine Harcomb, and then she looked at me with keen, searching eyes.

At this I doubt not I made an impatient gesture, for truly they seemed to regard me as a child who might not be trusted.

"Nay, be not angry," said my father, almost gently I thought. And this surprised me, for although I was a man in years he had not ceased to expect absolute and unquestioning obedience from me. In truth he held strongly that every man should be complete master in his house, and that no one should dare to dream of questioning his will.

But if I was not angry I was impatient. I had been on the tip-toe of expectation for hours, I had been told that I had a great work to do and yet I had only received hints as to how that work was to be done. For to be told that the marriage contract was in England was to tell me nothing, as any one can see. Still I held my peace and waited, wondering what was to come next.

"The marriage took place at a place called The Hague," said

the old dame with downcast eyes, "away across the sea in that outlandish country called Holland. It was performed in secret by a Papist priest. The priest had to swear that he would never reveal the marriage, nevertheless my daughter Lucy, for the sake of her good name, so cajoled the priest that he drew up the contract and gave it to her, unknown to the king. For fear it should be taken from her she determined to place it in safe keeping."

At this the woman ceased speaking, while I, who had been waiting for some news which would give me something like a reason for action, felt as though she were conjuring up a story.

"This showed," she went on presently, "that my daughter was not foolish as some have said, neither was she careless of her good name."

"But to whom did she give this precious document?" I asked, "and where is it now?"

"She gave it one in whom she trusted," said the dame sourly. "But he betrayed her trust. He found out the value of the paper, and brought it to England. Since then it hath changed hands again; but Katharine Harcomb hath discovered where it is now."

"Where?" I asked eagerly.

"It is at the house of Master Elijah Pycroft, who lives within five miles of Folkestone town," said Katharine Harcomb.

"How do you know?" I asked.

"I have been told by one who knows," she replied mysteriously.

"And who is Master Elijah Pycroft?" I asked again, for the

whole business seemed to be as unsubstantial as a vapour cloud.

"Ah, it is easy to tell you who he is, but difficult to say what he is," replied the woman. "But there be many stories told about him. Some say he hath sold himself to the devil, others that he is at the head of a gang of highwaymen, and that although he never appears among them, it is he who gives them information and shelters them when they are in danger. I have also been told that he is a Papist who is a servant of the Pope, and is plotting to bring England back to Popery again. But it is he who hath the contract, and it is he who will make use of it, if it be not taken from him. Some have it that the priest who married Lucy Walters to King Charles is in league with him."

Now this seemed to be a cock-and-bull story, and yet it had enough of meaning to set my nerves a-tingling again.

"What is the name of the priest?" I asked. "Is his home at The Hague? Because he is the man to find out first of all. If he confesses to the marriage, then – "

"Do you dare to doubt that my Lucy was a lawful wedded wife?" cried the old dame angrily. "She that is dead now, poor child. Why think ye that the young King's mother, the old dowager queen, would have taken the boy if there was no marriage?"

"Still it would be well to find him out," I urged. "Do you know his name?"

"That I do," cried she. "He is a French priest, and was in Holland only by stealth, seeing that the people who live

in Holland do hate the priests so much owing to their past sufferings. But Lucy told me his name, she did, ay, she told me when she was in England before they put her in the Tower. For my Lucy was a Catholic at heart, being brought to that way of thinking while she was in those foreign parts. He told her his name, and told her where he lived."

"Ah," I said, "that is better. Tell me, good dame."

"He lives at Boulogne," said the woman, "and his name is Father Pierre Rousseau, and I have been told that his church is the Church of St. Antony; but of that I am not sure."

But here at last was something definite to go upon. Boulogne was only a few hours' sail from English shores, and if Father Pierre Rousseau lived there he could be easily found out. I imagined that it would be easy to find out whether the woman's story were true or false, and upon this discovery a plan of action could be formed.

After this we fell to talking again, but beyond what I have written down, little of import could be gathered. I saw that much heed was paid to old wives' stories if they agreed with the desires of the women, but as to well proved facts there seemed nothing besides these two things. Still this was something. I could quickly find out whether Father Pierre Rousseau were flesh and blood, while the discovery of Master Elijah Pycroft should also be easy.

Had I been older, and known more of the ways of the world, I should, I doubt not, have asked many more questions, but by this time my mind was all aflame with the prospect of something to

do, while the nature of my work was all that a youth might ask for. Neither did I trouble much as to why I should be chosen. My father had told me that I should know some day, and with this I was fain content. I had a work to do, and that was enough.

"It may be that this priest knows more than he has told you," I cried at length; "my first business therefore will be to go to Boulogne, and after that to seek out Master Elijah Pycroft."

My father nodded his head approvingly, and yet I thought I saw doubt in his eyes.

"But what about the coming of the king?" I went on. "You told me only to-day that we must go to Dover to meet him, and if he comes to England soon, there will be no time for me to set out on my journey before seeing him."

"The king will not arrive for two weeks," replied my father.

"Two weeks?" I said questioningly.

"Ay, two weeks. This dame hath it, that according to messages which have been received in London town he will not come until the twenty-seventh or the twenty-eighth day of the month. There will therefore be time, if fortune favours you, to do much of your work before he comes hither."

Now being hot of blood, and not being aware of the many things which might hinder me, I was content with this reply, and determined not to fail being at Dover when the king should land.

Without wasting time by retailing what was said further, I hasten on to say that by break of day on the following morning I was on my horse's back, clad in my best attire, on my way to

Folkestone town, whither I hoped to get a passage to the coast of France. I was in gay spirits. I had pistols in my holsters, a sword by my side, and more money in my pouch than I ever hoped my father would give. Servant I had none, and that for two reasons. The first was, there was no man in my father's house who was fitted for such a post, even although I were rich enough to keep him; but more than this, it was deemed best that I should go quietly and alone, so that no one should suspect what my business might be. Servants, as all the world knows, have a way of talking about their masters' business, and if I had one he might unwittingly endanger me in my work.

My father had spoken gaily and confidently to me on my departure.

"I shall be at Dover on the twenty-sixth day of the month," he said. "I shall make my way to the *Fox and Hounds Inn*, and thither you must come and meet me, if your affairs allow you."

To this I gladly assented, thinking of the things I might have to tell him by that time.

"And mark you, Roland," continued my father earnestly, "be wary and bold in this matter. If you succeed, you will have such power at your command that even the new king will not be able to deny you what you ask. But be bold, my lad, and be wary. Speak but few words, and when you speak impart but as little information as possible. Ask questions without seeming to ask them, and ask them in such a way as to befool those you ask. Never allow want of courage to keep you from obtaining what

you desire. If you have to strike, strike hard. Be careful of your companions. Trust no man with your secrets. Remember that in ninety-nine times out of a hundred every man hath his own ends to serve, and if you are not eager and brave another will outdo you. Don't expect gratitude, and never trust any party or faction. Had I acted upon the advice I am giving you now, I should not be called 'landless Rashcliffe,' and you would not be a poor man's son. God be with you."

It was with these words ringing in my ears that I set my face towards London town on a bright May morning, and although it lay fully twelve miles from my home, I saw St. Paul's Church before seven o'clock, so early was I in the starting.

My heart was strangely light, I remember, for although I was much in the dark concerning my mission, its very nature stirred my blood, and made me fearless at coming difficulties. Nay, I rejoiced in them: who would not, when the fate of the country depended on my success? To find the king's marriage contract, and thus alter the succession to the crown of England! Surely that were enough to give nerve to a letterless ploughboy, much less the only son of the bravest gentleman in the county of Essex.

So early was I in London town that I had to wait fully an hour before I could get breakfast, but this I presently obtained at an inn which stood close by Ludgate, and within sight of Fleet Prison.

I found that the talk of every one was concerning the coming of the new king, and every man seemed to be on the tip-toe of expectation concerning the revelries which were to take place

when he appeared.

"Ay," said the innkeeper to me, "I know that Old Nol made the English feared the world all o'er, while never such an army was ever known as he led to battle; but what of that? He wanted to turn the whole land into Independent meeting houses. He wanted every man to turn psalm-singer, and would have none about him but those who spoke the Puritan cant. If ever a man loved to see a cock-fight, or a bull baited, he was treated like a murderer, while no man dared to drink as an Englishman should drink. But that is all over now. The king loves his wine and his pleasure even as a king should. That's why he could not do with the sour-faced Scots. When he comes we shall be able to drink again, and these psalm-singing chaps will have to bark at back doors. Old Drury will have its fun, and a man will be able to speak to a pretty woman without being placed in the lock-up."

"Think you that aught will be done to those who fought against the new king's father?" I asked.

"Ay, that is what people say. Men have it that every Puritan will be dragged out of his house, and every man who fought against his sacred Majesty's person will be hanged. As for these Independents, well, already they who carried their heads so high be slinking along back ways like whipped dogs. Ah well, it is right. Let us live a merry life, and God save the king!"

Presently, as I went towards the river, I found out that the man had spoken truly: I saw men clad in sober-coloured garments talking one to another, as though some calamity were near. And

this was no wonder, for presently, as the number of the people in the streets increased I saw that these same men were howled at by the mob. Some pointed to the Bibles which hung from their girdles, and called out "Pharisees, hypocrites!" Others again cried out "Psalm-singing rogues!" while others threatened them with the stocks and the pillory when the king came.

"It becomes worse each day," I heard one of these sober-clad men say to another.

"Ay the Scriptures be fulfilled; and the devil is unloosed."

"The people of God will fare badly, methinks."

"Nevertheless, the new king hath promised that every man shall be forgiven for what he hath done."

"The new king! The son of Charles Stuart, a traitor and a liar whom our great Oliver beheaded! As well expect mercy from a wolf."

"Hush, man! If we be heard we shall be taken note of. Let us be wise as serpents and harmless as doves."

And this kind of thing I found everywhere as I rode through London streets. On the one hand was a kind of lawless joy, which prevailed greatly; and on the other fearful foreboding as to the coming days.

But I stayed not long in London, for I was eager to make my way to Folkestone. The wedding contract hidden in the black box was more to me than the rejoicings of the Royalists, or the fears of the Separatists.

It took me two days to reach Folkestone; indeed, I did not

reach this town till the evening of the second day. Moreover, the second day of my journey had been rainy, and I was both wet and tired when I reached the *Barley Sheaf Inn*, which looked homely and comfortable, for the which I was very thankful. As the evening was rainy, I thought I should perchance be the only traveller; but no sooner had the ostler taken my horse from me than I saw two persons ride up, which interested me greatly. Perhaps this was because they both seemed anxious to hide their faces. The one was, as far as I could judge, a strongly-built man, but of what age I could not judge; the other was a woman, clad from head to foot in a long cloak. Moreover, she wore a hood, which almost hid her face. Nevertheless, I caught one glimpse of it as she passed in at the door. It was as pale as death, while her eyes were full of terror.

"Private rooms," said the man, "and that without delay."

After they had passed out of sight I fell to wondering who they were; but I never dreamed then that their fate would be linked with mine in such a wondrous way.

CHAPTER IV
THE HAPPENING AT THE INN

After I had partaken of food, I made my way to the harbour for the purpose of finding out when a boat might be leaving for the neighbourhood of Boulogne. By this time the rain had ceased, and although the night was wellnigh upon the town I was able to see something of its character. Not that it was of any great note. It consisted of only a few narrow streets, which being wet, looked miserable and squalid. The bold outline of the cliffs impressed me greatly, however, and I judged that on fair days the whole district must be pleasant to behold.

I found as I passed through, that here as well as in London the sole subject of conversation was the coming of the new king, and of the changes his coming would bring about. Here also as in London, men had it that it would go hard with those who had fought against the late king, and especially against those who had put him to death. Nevertheless none, as far as I could discover, spoke against him; rather they even praised the profligacy of which all seemed to believe him guilty.

But much to my disappointment I could hear of no vessel that would leave for the French coast, at least for three days, and as I had not enough money to hire one for myself I had to content myself with the prospect of spending that time in the vicinity of

Folkestone. I was not at all dismayed at this, for I reflected that I might be able to discover something of Master Elijah Pycroft, and might not indeed have to go to France at all.

When I returned to the inn I found my way into a large low room where several persons were sitting. Some were playing cards, others were drinking, as it seemed to me for the sake of drinking, while others still were laughing at their own wit for want of something better to laugh at.

No one seemed to take note of my entrance, save one, who pointed to a seat by his side, as if to bid me welcome.

"What will you drink?" he asked.

"What is the house noted for?" I asked, for although I determined not to drink, remembering the old adage that "when the drink's in the wit's out," I thought it best to attract no notice by failing to fall in with the custom.

"Sack, my master, sack," replied the man. "There is no better sack between here and London town than can be bought at the *Barley Sheaf*, and what is more a man can drink his fill and no questions asked. We be no longer troubled by a sour-faced Independent constable who is ever on the watch for a man who seeks to be merry."

"Did they trouble you much in Cromwell's days?"

"Trouble me! Marry, and that they did. No man pleased unless he carried a Bible at his belt, and sung psalms through his nose. Why a man could in no wise make merry. The man who kept a dog or a cock was watched day and night, while those who were

suspected of having a Prayer-book in his house was almost as much in danger as those who read the Bible in Queen Mary's days. Why even the town crier had to speak through his nose, as though he were singing psalms in church."

At this he laughed as though he had made a good joke.

"But all will be changed now?" I suggested.

"Ay, but they be changed already, young master," said another man who was listening. "Already Old Nol's people be seeking to make friends with those who be shouting 'God save the king!' while a man may kiss his sweetheart, and no questions be asked. And what would you? The king, who hath received fifty thousand pounds from Parliament to buy himself good clothes, and good wine, hath sent word to us that we must drink his health in the best wine and ale that our town affords."

"Ay," said the other, "and painters be everywhere washing out the State's arms and painting the Lion and the Unicorn instead. I do hear, too, that the king hath given orders that all the vessels built by Old Nol are to be renamed, as his Majesty doth much dislike the present names."

"Have you heard aught concerning what will be done to those who took part in the king's father's death?" I asked.

"I would not stand in their shoes for something," he replied significantly.

"In spite of the Act of Oblivion," I suggested.

"Act of Oblivion! Think you that the new king will forget the name of those who killed his father? Why I do hear that Sir

Charles Denman is even now being followed by those who were faithful to Charles I."

"Sir Charles Denman, who is he?" I asked, for I had never heard his name before.

"Never heard of Sir Charles Denman! Why where have you lived, young master? He was one who cried loudest for the death of Charles I, and who hath ever since Richard Cromwell died done his utmost to persuade General Monk against having aught to do with the new king. He hath spoken words which are said to be treasonable, and what is more is as fanatical a preacher as Hugh Peters himself."

"Ay, but there are no edicts out against him?" I queried.

"But there are, young master; at least so men say. Some have it that the king, no sooner was he invited to come back to his throne, than he sent secret instructions that Sir Charles should be arrested and imprisoned until his Majesty's pleasure be known."

"Know you aught of Sir Charles?" I asked.

"Nay, I know naught, but men have it that he is a dangerous man, and not to be trusted. I have been told that his very preaching is only a cloak to cover up his misdoings. Men say he hath never married, and yet he is accompanied on his journeys by one who ought to be his wife. It is said, too, that he whips her as a man might whip a spaniel. A sullen, cruel man whom no one loves."

At this I was silent, whereupon the man went on.

"Some have it that he is married to this woman, who is of low

degree, while other gossips say that he hath stolen her from her father's house, because she will inherit a great fortune when her father dies."

"Have you ever seen him?"

"Nay, but I am told he is the best swordsman in the kingdom, that he is deadly with the pistol, and that he shews no mercy anywhere?"

"And are all the people loyal around here?" I asked.

"Ay, what would you?"

"And all the old families will receive the new king with open arms?"

"Ay, all as far as I know."

"I do not know the names of these families – at least not of all," I said, feeling my way towards the information I desired, "but you as an important man doubtless know them all."

"Ay," he replied, sitting back in his chair with a look of importance on his face. "There be the Jeffries and old Sir Michael Oldbury, and Admiral Billton, and Squire Barton, and my Lord Bridgman, and others. Most of them nod to me when they come to town."

"I think I have heard of a Master Pycroft," I said, "know you him?"

He shook his head. "No," he replied, "there be no man of note within ten miles of Folkestone who bears that name."

At this my heart seemed to sink in my shoes, for it seemed as though I had come on a fool's errand. Still I kept a brave face,

and answered as though the matter were of no import.

"I must have mistaken the name," I said, "or perchance he lived in some other part of the country."

"Stay," said the man, "there is an old place called 'Pycroft,' but it hath been in ruins for years. It is an old house among the Pycroft woods, and is said to be haunted. No man lives there, but I have heard that an old miser had it long years ago. He was killed for his money, and ever since the place hath been infested by evil spirits. Years ago, about the time the king was beheaded, I mind me that I passed by it, but not a soul was to be seen. The windows were broken, and the gardens were all covered with weeds. Neither sight nor sound of living being could I see or hear. Even the birds seemed afraid to sing."

"What was the name of the miser?" I asked.

"People called him 'Solomon the Fool,'" replied the man; "'Solomon,' because he was said to have much learning, and 'The Fool' because he did not know how to use it. Ah, and now I come to think of it, I have heard that it was once held by the Denmans, but whether they were any kin to Sir Charles, of whom we have been speaking, I know not."

After this I learnt but little more, for a man came in who said he had ridden from Dover, and began to tell of the grand preparations which were being made to welcome King Charles II when he landed on English shores. So feeling somewhat weary, and desiring to think of what I had heard, I made my way to the chamber the innkeeper had allotted to me, and then by the

light of the candle which had been given to me, I sought to set down in order what had happened to me since I left London town. I had come to my chamber very quietly, but even if I had made a noise the shouts of the revellers in the room below had drowned any sounds I might have made. When I had been alone an hour or more, however, they began to grow more quiet, which led me to think they were leaving the inn for their homes. I therefore decided that I would undress and go to bed, but on second thoughts I simply pulled off my riding boots and doublet and threw myself on the bed. I did not feel at all sleepy, but ere long I felt myself becoming drowsy; but even then I did not think I should fall asleep. In this I was mistaken, however, for after that I remembered nothing until I suddenly awoke.

At first I scarce remembered where I was, but the sound of someone sobbing brought everything to my recollection with great clearness.

"No, no! Not that!"

I heard the words with great distinctness, and they were spoken by a woman. Moreover, the one who spoke them was in great terror, for although she spoke not loudly, I detected the anguish in her voice.

As may be imagined, the woman's cries caused me to listen intently.

"I tell you, yes." It was a man's voice I heard, and the partition between the room in which I lay and the next, from whence the sounds came, was so thin that I could hear much of what was

said. "This must be done. It is my will."

He spoke in a low voice, but it vibrated with passion.

"But it is more than five miles away, and it is midnight."

This the woman said in a low, fearsome voice.

"What of that? The distance is not too great for you to walk easily. You have rested, and you have had food. As to its being night, so much the better. Every one is now abed, and no one will see you."

"But the way is lonely; besides, the place hath an evil name. You have told me yourself that it is haunted."

"So much the better for my purposes. You must go thither, and find out what I have told you of. You can be back here before folks be astir."

"It is cruel, cruel," said the woman with a sob.

"It is your duty; you owe it to me," replied the man. "Besides, you dare not refuse. If I speak but a word you know what will happen, so do my bidding, and that without delay."

"But who shall I find there? It is said to be an empty house; besides, perchance I cannot find it. It is in the midst of woods; and even if I met some one on the road, I dare not ask them where Pycroft is."

At this, as may be imagined, my heart gave a great bound. These people were speaking of the very place I desired to enter; moreover, there was evidently some secret surrounding it. Did this man know aught of what had been told me? Did he seek to find the king's marriage contract as well as I? Besides, who

was he, and what was his relation to this woman? These and many other questions I asked myself as I lay silently on my bed, for in my eagerness I did not realize that I was playing the eavesdropper. In truth, everything had come upon me so suddenly that I scarce understood what was taking place.

"There will be no difficulty in finding the way," said the man. "You will climb the hill out of the town, then you will take the road that leads to London. This road you wot of as well as I. When you come to the pond by the roadside you will see the gate on the right side of the road, and from there you can easily follow the path leading to the house."

"But why can you not go yourself?" said the woman.

"Because it is not my will," replied the man. "Besides, it would not be safe for me to go until I know the old man's thoughts: he might betray me, and then what would happen to you?"

"To me?" repeated the woman.

"Ay, to you. Whither can you go if I cease to protect you? Ay, and what will befall you?"

"But I have done nothing."

"Nothing! Then go and show yourself to him. Ay, let it be known in the inn who you are. If I had not given you my name, where would you be now?"

I have recorded this conversation as well as I am able; nevertheless I cannot vouch for its entire correctness, seeing that many of the words were almost inaudible.

After this I heard sounds as though some one were preparing

to go out; a little later there were footsteps along the passage, and then silence. My nerves were all tingling, while my brain was in a whirl. What did all this mean, and what had I to do?

In a minute my mind was made up. I would wait until all was silent, and time given for the man to return to his chamber, and then I would creep out of the house, and follow the road the man had so clearly marked out. If their interest was at Pycroft, so was mine; besides, my heart went out in sympathy towards the woman whose voice was so plaintive, and whose condition seemed so piteous.

Presently I heard stealthy footsteps outside my door. They passed along the corridor, and presently were lost in the distance. Now was the time for me to act. All my weariness had gone; I was eager and alert; the mystery upon which I had happened threw its spell upon me, and I longed to discover its meaning. Besides, it fell in with my plans; and I remembered my father's words warning me never to allow want of courage to stand in the way of fulfilling my purpose.

I fastened my sword carefully by my side, and having seen to my pistols, I took my riding boots in my hand, and crept carefully along the passage towards a doorway I had noted during the evening. No one seemed astir, and the house was as silent as death. When I came to the door, I found that it was unbolted. Evidently the man had left it so that the woman might enter when she had performed his mission.

Closing the door silently behind me, I pulled on my boots, and

a minute later was creeping silently up the hill out of the town. Once away from the houses, I realized the cruelty of the man in sending out a woman on such an errand. It is true the night was neither dark nor cold, but for a woman to take such a long weary journey alone at such a time was hard indeed. The country, since Oliver Cromwell's death, had become infested with footpads, while the thought of going to a haunted house was terrible enough for a man, much less a woman. Besides, she was troubled by some fear. The man had some power over her beyond the ordinary, or she would never submit to his will. What was it? I called to mind the story told me concerning Sir Charles Denman that very night. Was this man Sir Charles? And was this woman the one who had been associated with him? This might be the case; and yet I could not believe it, why I could not tell. Perhaps it was because I had learnt to be wary of stories told at taverns and inns, perhaps because I desired another solution to the mystery.

When I was well out in the country I stopped and listened. I also looked eagerly along the road, but I could neither hear nor see the woman I had come out to follow. Thereupon I started running, for the road was better than ordinary, and the light of the moon revealed all pits and dangerous places. Presently I reached the top of the hill, where the road crossed an open space. Neither hedge nor ditch hid aught from me, although a mile on, skirting the open plain was a belt of trees. Here I stopped again, and gazed eagerly along the roadway. Yes, there could be no doubt about it, away in the distance was a dark object.

Up to this time I had formed no plan of action save to follow the woman. Now it came to me that if I desired to speak to her I should not know what to say, while if I watched her without letting her know of my presence I should be acting the part of a spy. She was alone and unprotected, she did not know that I heard something of what had passed between her and the man at the inn. Therefore my presence would give her a fright, while I had no excuse for intruding upon her as she took this lonely and mysterious night journey.

What an older man might have done I may not say. What I should do now that I have passed the age of impetuous youth I dare not hazard. But then I was young, I knew naught of the world, and the mission upon which I myself had come caused me to surround everything with the halo of youthful vision. I determined that I would overtake her, tell her that I had heard what had passed between her and the man at the *Barley Sheaf*, and then offer to accompany her on her journey. Doubtless an older man would have acted differently, but I suspect that my decision was that which any youth of my age will understand.

I therefore commenced running again, and I saw that every step lessened the distance between me and the dark form which toiled silently along the lonely road. Not a house was in sight, neither could I see aught but the line of road curling its way along the heather covered land, and the belt of trees which lay beyond. I ran silently, because I kept on the edge of the road, where grass grew, and as I drew nearer I saw that the woman kept straight on,

looking neither to the right nor to the left.

Presently the moon, which had been under a cloud, shot into the clear sky, so that I could see her plainly. She was clad from head to foot in a long garment, while on her head she wore a hood, as if even in the loneliness of midnight she desired to hide her face. I could see, too, that she was tall and that she moved with rapidity and ease; but that was all, for her back was toward me, and although the light of the moon was bright I could not even tell the colour of the garment she wore.

As I came up close to her, my heart fell to beating wildly, not because of my exertion in overtaking her, but because of the strangeness of my adventure. In truth it seemed as though I were in a dream from which I should presently awake, only to find what had taken place was but the wild fancy which comes to one when one loses control over one's own imaginings.

Whether I should have dared to speak to her I know not, but when I was only a few yards from her I happened to kick a stone which lay in my way, and as it rattled along the road she turned around sharply, and with a cry of fear.

"What do you wish?" she asked, and I noted that her voice trembled not one whit.

But I did not reply; I was so much wrought upon that no words would come to me.

"I have naught to give you," she said, "so pass on and allow me to go my way."

As she spoke her hood dropped from her face and I saw her

every feature plainly.

CHAPTER V
A MIDNIGHT MEETING

My first glance at the woman's face showed me that it was the same as I had seen a few hours before. In the moonlight she looked very pale, and I saw that she was young, not indeed as I judged more than twenty years of age. But what struck me most was the fact that she betrayed no fear; rather I saw a look of defiance, and I could not understand how a woman who had, as I thought, been cowed by the man at the inn could meet me here alone at midnight and be so brave. Nay, as I thought, there was a look of defiance in her face, and a confidence in her own strength.

"I desire naught from you, and I have no will to molest you," I said.

"Then go your way."

"Ay, I will go my way," I replied, "and perchance my way may be yours."

"It cannot be. If you have no will to molest me, take your road and I will take mine."

Her quiet confidence almost angered me. Fearfulness I was prepared to meet, while cries I expected; but to be quietly commanded to pass on, knowing what I knew, made me somewhat impatient, and hence more at my ease.

"It may be, mistress, when I have told you what is in my mind, you will not be so desirous to be rid of me."

"There can be naught in your mind that concerns me." Then with a flash as quick as light she said, "Do you boast of gentle blood, young sir?"

"I am of gentle birth," I replied.

"Then you must know that when a lady would be alone no man of honour will stay by her side."

"That's as may be," I replied. "The lady may be surrounded by dangers of which she knows nothing, in which case the man of honour will stay and protect her even against her will!"

For a moment she gazed around her as if she apprehended danger, but only for a moment.

"Will it please you to pass on?" she said.

"Not until I have told you what is in my mind."

"Then you are a spy."

"As you will," I replied, for the words angered me, and even although I had no sufficient excuse for remaining by her side, I determined to know more of her.

"Perhaps my first impression was right," she went on, "and you are a common thief. If so, it is useless coming to me, I have no money."

At this I was silent, for my brain refused to give me a suitable answer.

"So having no money, and having no desire to remain longer in your company, I will e'en go on my way."

"No you will not."

At this her eyes flashed like fire.

"Why?" she asked.

"Because you are afraid to let me know where you are going."

At this she gazed fearfully at me, but she spoke no word.

"Nevertheless, I know the place for which you are bound," I said. "But if I were you I would not go."

"Why?"

"Because the man who sent you seeks only his own safety and not yours. Because he desires to use you only as a key to unlock the door by which he would enter, because he has gained power over you only to make you his tool."

"What do you know of the man who sent me?"

This she said, as I thought, involuntarily, for she quickly went on: "How do you know I have been sent? In these days even a woman may – " and then she stopped suddenly, like one afraid.

"Because I have been staying at the *Barley Sheaf*," I replied. "Because I saw you come to the inn; because I heard your conversation to-night with the man who hath sent you to do his bidding, against your own will."

"Then you *are* a spy?"

"If you will, but let me tell you what is in my mind before you call me by that name again. I was awakened an hour or two ago by the sound of a woman sobbing. She was pleading with some man not to send her out at midnight, but he persisted. I heard him threaten her, I heard him tell her that if her name were known

some dread calamity would happen to her. I knew that he had some power over her, possessed some secret concerning her, and that she had perforce to do his will."

"Well, what then, sir?" she asked sharply.

"He commanded her to go to Pycroft, along a road that is infested by footpads."

"And what have you to do with this?"

"Nothing except that I determined to follow her, and offer her what protection and help I could give her. Ay, and more, to rid her from the man who is so unworthy to call himself her protector."

At this she came up close to me, and looked steadily into my face.

"Is that all you know?" she said.

"That is all."

"And that is your reason for following me?"

"That is my reason."

"What is your name?"

I could see no harm in telling her. My name was unknown, and my mission hither was, I believed, a secret.

"Roland Rashcliffe," I said.

"Of Epping?"

"Of that family, yes."

"And this is true?"

"On my word as a gentleman, yes."

Again she looked at me steadily as if she were in sore straits what to do, and did not know whether she might trust me.

"You know nothing about me beyond what you have said?"

"Nothing."

"And you desire only to see me safe from harm?"

"That is all," and at the time it was true, for under the influence of the woman's presence my own mission to Pycroft seemed of little import.

"And if I allow you to accompany me you will ask me no questions?"

"I desire you to answer no questions of mine, nor to reveal to me anything which you would keep secret."

"You do not know my name – nor his name?"

"No."

Again she scanned me eagerly, and then looked around her. All round us was a weary waste of uncultivated land, beyond the dark woods a cloud shot over the moon, while away in the distance the horizon was blackened by what looked like a coming storm. The winter had gone, and the spring was upon us, nevertheless the night had grown cold. I saw her shudder.

"What are you?" she said. "Roundhead, or Cavalier?"

"I do not know."

At this she looked at me suspiciously.

"My father fought for the king in the first Civil War," I replied. "But I have stayed at home all my life. I have not interested myself in politics. I have helped to look after what remains of my father's estates."

"You have spent your life in idleness?"

"I have sought to learn those things which may become a gentleman," I replied. "I can use a sword, and I am not altogether an ignoramus."

"You love books then?"

"I have read the writings of both William Shakespeare and John Milton," I replied, "and I know a little of such writings of Corneille and Molière as have been brought to this country."

"You know French then?"

"A little. But that hath nothing to do with my desire to befriend you. You are in trouble, and I would help you."

"You desire not to harm me?"

"So help me God, no."

"But why are you here?" she asked suspiciously. "If your home is at Epping Forest, what are you doing at Folkestone?"

"I came at my father's bidding," I replied after a moment's hesitation.

"Ah, you have a secret, too," she cried.

At this I was silent, while I wondered at the quickness with which she fastened upon the truth. Nevertheless, I was sure her voice was friendly, and I thought she was glad to have me near. And this was no wonder, for courageous although she might be, her mission was one which must strike terror in the bravest heart.

But still she hesitated. What was passing in her mind I knew not; but I imagined that two fears fought one against the other in her heart. One, the fear of going alone to the haunted house situated amid the great Pycroft woods, and the other the fear of

accepting the protection of one of whom she knew nothing, and whom she had never seen until that hour.

The winds blew colder, while away in the distance I heard the rumble of thunder, and this I think decided her. Had it been day I do not believe she would have listened to me for a moment, but it was night and a thunderstorm was sweeping towards us; besides, although a courageous one, she was still a woman.

"Promise me again that you will not seek to interfere with my mission, or to harm me," she said.

"I promise," I replied.

"I will accept your escort," she said. "Come quickly, for what is done must be done quickly."

We walked together across the broad open land, while the black cloud grew larger and larger. The moon had also sunk low, and the night had grown dark. Even now a strange feeling comes into my heart as I think of our journey towards the old house, for reared in the country as I had been, ay, and in the very midst of the great forest which lies east of London town, I thought I never knew any place so lonely as this. Besides, I knew naught of my companion. That she was young, and fair to look upon, I could not help seeing, but I knew not her name, neither did I understand the mystery which surrounded her life.

Twice I saw her turn and gaze furtively at me, as though desiring to know what was in my mind, but for the most part she walked straight on, never turning to the right nor to the left.

Nearer and nearer we came to the pine woods which stood on

the edge of the open land, and as we did so drops of rain began to fall upon us. Then I thought I saw her shudder, but she spoke no word. In spite of the way she had spoken to me, I fell to pitying her more than ever. For truly it was a sad predicament for a young maid, evidently well-born and tenderly reared, to be placed in. From what she had said to the man at the inn, she knew nothing either of Pycroft or its inmates, neither could she tell what her welcome to the lonely house would be like.

Once she stopped and listened as though she heard strange sounds near, and then presently moved on again without a word. By and bye we came to a pond beside the road, close by which was a gateway. Beyond were, as far as I could judge, dense dark woods.

"This is the place," I said.

"How do you know?"

"It accords with the description the man gave you at the inn."

"Yes, but you know nothing of those who live at the house?"

"Nothing."

"You may accompany me until we come in sight of the house, but after that you must go no further."

"Why?"

"You promised to ask no questions."

"I promised not to interfere with your mission," I replied, "neither will I. I have kept by your side for more than two miles without speaking a word concerning it. Nevertheless I have not promised to obey you in all things. Had I, I should not be by your

side now. I cannot promise not to go too close to the house. It may be that you will need help, and I mean to keep close by your side."

"But why?" and I thought my words gave her comfort.

"Because I desire to be your friend."

In this I spoke the truth, for although I had it in my heart to enter the house in order to carry out my plans, yet my pity for the maid, and my determination to befriend her became stronger each minute.

"My friend!" she said. "You do not know what you say. Do you know what it would cost to be my friend? Besides, why should you? You do not know who I am; you have never heard my name."

"No," I replied, "I have never heard your name, I do not know who you are."

"Then why should you desire to befriend me?"

I could not answer her, neither for that matter could I answer myself when the question came to me. But I think I know now. Although my father had taught me to distrust all men, he had always led me to think of my mother as a beautiful noble woman, one who was as pure as an angel, and as truthful as the sun which shines in the heavens. Thus it came about that I was led to look at womanhood through the medium of my mother's life, and to regard it as a gentleman's duty ever to treat them with respect and reverence. Nay, more, I had learnt, I know not how, to regard it the first duty of a man of honour ever to seek to befriend a

gentlewoman, and that at all hazards.

"Because you are a gentlewoman, and you are in trouble," I said.

We had been standing beside the pond during this conversation, as though we desired to delay entering the dark woods close by. Once beneath the shadows of the trees we should scarce be able to see each other, but here no shadow fell, and I could see her plainly. I heard her sob, too, as though my words had touched her heart.

"Do not be afraid," I said, "I will let no man harm you."

I spoke as a brother might speak to a sister, and there was naught but pity in my heart. Perhaps my voice had a tremor in it, for I was much wrought upon. Be that as it may, for the first time she lost control over herself, and she gave way to tears.

"I am afraid, oh, I am afraid," she said.

"You need not be," I said, "no harm shall befall you."

"Oh, but you do not know. You do not know who is by your side, you do not know what I fear."

"You need not fear to tell me," I said.

"Fear to tell you!" she cried, "but I do. Ay and if it were known that you walk by my side, and that you seek to befriend me, your life would be in danger. You do not know why I have consented to come here, you do not know of what I am accused. Nay, if I told you my name, you would either drag me back to Folkestone town and tell – " Here she ceased speaking, as though she were frightened at her own words.

"No I should not," I made answer.

"Why?"

"Because I do not believe you are capable of committing a crime."

At this she laughed aloud. A hard, cruel, bitter laugh.

"You had better go back to your bed, Master Rashcliffe," she said. "You do not know why I am here, you do not know what my mission is. I will tell you. I am here because I fear the devil, and because I seek to do his bidding."

She said this as if through her set teeth, and, as it seemed to me, with terrible passion. In spite of myself I felt a shiver pass through my veins. Nevertheless I still pitied her. For be it remembered I was only twenty-three, and the sight of the maid was in truth piteous. All the same the words I spoke next were dragged from me almost against my will.

"What!" I cried. "Have you sold yourself to the devil?"

"Ay, Master Rashcliffe, that is it, and I have found him a hard master."

I saw her clench her hands as if in a frenzy, while her eyes gleamed with a great passion.

"I do not believe in such things," I said, for although many witches had been burnt in England, even in my time, I had no faith in much of what I had heard.

"Why do I go up to the old house in Pycroft woods?" she went on. "Is it for pleasure? Have you not heard it is haunted? I tell you deeds are done there which would frighten you, brave as you

think you are. And I go because I must. Now had you not better go back and leave me?"

"No," I made answer. "I will accompany you even as I have said."

"But you promised not to hinder me."

"No, I will not hinder you, because, in spite of what you say, I do not believe evil is in your heart."

"There you make a mistake, Master Rashcliffe. I have evil in my heart. And it is not without reason. Have you a sister?"

"No, why do you ask?"

"Because if you had you might understand me. If you had a sister, bound to obey a bad man, as his wife, would she not be justified in having evil in her heart?"

"His wife?" I cried.

"Ay, his wife!" and at this she laughed bitterly. "Now you see how useless it is for you to try and help me, for a wife must obey her husband no matter what he commands her. Do you think I would be here else? Look!" and she showed me her left hand, where I saw a plain gold ring.

At this I said nothing, nevertheless I did not in any wise think of giving up my determination to accompany her.

"You are still determined to enter this old house?" I said quietly.

"I go because I must," she replied.

Without another word I opened the gate and motioned her to pass in.

"You still persist in going?" she said, as if in astonishment, but she passed through the open gate, while I walked quietly by her side.

It was not easy to keep to the track, but I managed to follow it while the woman, who I was sure felt glad that I had persisted in accompanying her, kept near me. How long we walked I do not know. The woods grew darker and thicker, while the very air we breathed seemed laden with mystery and dread.

Once or twice I stopped, for I thought I heard footsteps, but as I listened all was silent.

"Oh, I am afraid," she said again and again. I did not reply to her, for I had no word of cheer to offer. In truth I was not far from being afraid myself. An open enemy I could meet as well as another, but the dreadful silence, with the occasional suggestion of stealthy footsteps, made my heart grow cold in spite of myself.

At length the track ended in an open space, and then my heart gave a leap, for a little distance away I saw the dark outline of an old house. Never until then did I realise how dark and lonesome a human habitation could be. Not a sound could I hear save the beating of our own hearts, naught could I see but the grim walls of the time-worn building.

"Look," she whispered fearfully. "Yonder is a light."

She spoke truly, for almost hidden by a large evergreen tree, yet plainly to be seen was a tiny light.

"That will be Master Pycroft!" I said almost involuntarily.

For answer she only shuddered, and then without saying a

word she walked in the direction of the light.

CHAPTER VI
THE OLD HOUSE AT PYCROFT

Strange as it may seem, I had during the time I had been with this woman wellnigh forgotten my own desire to enter this old house in the midst of the Pycroft woods. My own mission had somehow become dim and unreal. My interest in the strange journey of my companion had been so strong that nothing else seemed of much importance. Nay more, although my plan of accompanying her to this place, in order that I might gain knowledge of the thing I desired to possess, first helped me in my determination, I had never considered the reasons which should induce her to come hither. That she went there at the command of the man at the inn was plain enough, but why he wished her to go I had not even tried to surmise. The reason for this was, I suppose, owing to the fact that I was carried away by the excitement of the hour.

Now that we were within sight of the house, however, everything came to me like a flash of light. I realized that I was not only the companion of the woman, who at the bidding of her husband travelled to this lonely house at midnight, but that I had travelled thither that I might also discover the secret that lay therein. Then another thought struck me. Might not my own quest be associated with hers? Why did the man send her

hither? It was for no light matter. Coward although I believed him to be, a midnight journey such as this must have sufficient reasons. Moreover, how could I help this woman – for this I had determined to do – unless I knew the reasons of her obedience?

My mind, I remember, was strangely clear at the moment. Excited as I was, all the issues came to me plainly, and I felt I must form some plan of action without delay. During the whole journey I had asked her no questions concerning the inmates of Pycroft Hall. According to the man in the inn the place was inhabited only by the spirits of the dead. Solomon the Fool, as he had been called, was dead, and the place had fallen into ruins. Nevertheless some one lived there. The man at the inn had said something about an "old man," from whom the woman was to obtain what he desired. What did this mean? Who was this old man? And what connection had he with the person to whom Katharine Harcomb had referred?

All these things whetted my curiosity, and made me determine to penetrate the secret of the light at the little mullioned window, and to learn what lay within the grim dark walls. I therefore hurried to the woman's side.

"Do you realize what you are doing?"

"Ay, I realize."

"But you must not go in there alone."

"Yes, I must go alone."

"No, I shall accompany you."

"You must not. You dare not."

"I must, and I dare," I replied. "I have promised to protect you, and I shall keep my word."

"Ay, and you promised not to interfere with me," she said. "I have your word as a gentleman. Besides if you went in there your life would not be worth a groat. You would never leave it alive."

"Why? Is it the home of a band of robbers?"

"It is the home of darkness. Besides, I must go alone – alone I tell you. Things are done behind those walls from which you could not protect me, from which no one can protect me save him who – who will not."

"Then why go?"

"Because I must. Because – but what is that to you? You have accompanied me hither against my will. You have given me your word of honour not to hinder me in the work I have to do – to try and learn nothing from me which I do not wish to tell you."

"I am determined to protect you," I said. "If there is danger there for me, there is danger for you. Nay more. I am a man and can protect myself, while you are a woman, weak and helpless."

"Weak and helpless!" She turned to me with flashing eyes as I had seen her first. "I am neither weak nor helpless," she said angrily. "I do not carry a sword, but I have weapons of which you know nothing, Master Rashcliffe. Moreover if you dare to hinder me I will use them, and perhaps against you."

Was this an empty threat, or was there some meaning behind it? Certainly she looked as though she might carry her words into effect, and I realized that although she had been moved to

tears during the journey, she was no weak, helpless creature, but a strong woman, capable and self-reliant. It came to me then, moreover, as I have discovered since, that it must have been something beyond the ordinary to cause her to obey the man at the inn in this matter, even although he exercised a husband's control over her. Still I was not to be daunted by a woman's anger, and I answered calmly but firmly —

"I will keep to my words," I said; "I will ask you no questions which you do not desire to answer; but because I am determined to protect you I will discover the secret of this house."

At this she looked steadily in my face again, and by this time there was sufficient light for her to see my features plainly.

"Then let me tell you this," she said quietly. "If you seek to enter with me you will place me in danger. You will, – but never mind. If you desire to befriend me, I beseech you not to enter with me. Even now, even by being with you here, I may be writing my own death warrant. Oh, you do not know, you do not know! If you desire to go there," and here she pointed towards the light that still twinkled from the window, "well go, although I would beseech you never to seek to penetrate those walls. But do not come with me now. If you do I am undone."

She spoke in a low tone, scarcely above a whisper, but there was such intensity in her voice, almost amounting to agony, that my heart failed me. Moreover I considered that if I went with her I should not be able to discover the thing I desired. I reflected that above everything my work must be done in secret, and to

go with her would be out of accord with the plans I had been formulating.

"Has the person who caused the light to shine there power over you?" I asked.

"I will answer you nothing. Find out what you will and how you will, but do not seek to go with me."

I do not think she fully realized what she was saying, so eager was she to be alone. I could see that she desired at all costs to be rid of me, and at that moment I thought of a plan whereby I could seemingly yield to her desires and still have my own way.

"But what would you have me do?" I asked.

"You desire to help me?"

"Yes. I have said so. Nay, I am determined to protect you."

She hesitated a second.

"Then stay here until I return. I shall not be long, at least I do not think so."

"But if you are in danger there?"

"If I am, and I need your help, I will cry out loud enough for you to hear me."

"Then I may enter?"

"Then you may enter – yes, if you can."

There was mockery in her tones, but it was the mockery of despair.

"Very well," I replied quietly, "I will obey."

She looked at me eagerly.

"And you will not interfere with me?"

"No."

"And you will remain here hidden from sight?"

"I will stay outside, hidden from sight, but I shall be near to help in case of need."

She heaved a sigh as I spoke, a sigh with a tremble in it, and I knew she feared to do the work that lay before her, whatever it might be. But she did not hesitate. Walking in the direction of the house, which was about a musket shot away, I saw her walk steadily across the open space that lay between me and the house, and a little later was lost behind the dark shrubs that grew close to what I thought looked like the entrance to the building.

I waited in silence, straining every nerve to catch the least approach of sound, and presently heard the sound of voices. After that all became silent. The light still shone from the window, which as I have said was partly hidden by an evergreen tree that grew near. The fever of discovery was now hot upon me. I remembered the woman's words, "Find out what you can, and how you will, but do not seek to go with me," and I determined to act upon them. Evidently she believed that I could discover nothing from the outside, but I believed otherwise. It was this belief which caused me to yield to her wishes and remain outside. No sooner, therefore, did the sound of voices cease than I went stealthily across what had at one time been a lawn towards the evergreen tree I had seen growing near the window. I saw in a moment that it suited my purpose, and a few seconds later I was perched on a branch on a level with the window from which

the light had been shining, but which was now dark even as the others were. This, as may be imagined, ruined my plans. My desire had been to look through the window, and so watch what took place in the room, and now everything had come to naught. Still I waited. I reflected that the light meant some living person in the room. It suggested that whoever lived in the old house used this part of it as a dwelling place. Even if the light was gone now it might be brought back presently, and I had plenty of time to wait. Meanwhile I placed myself in a position to watch the window, while the trunk of the tree was such an excellent protection that any one could pass under it, and look up at it, without ever dreaming that I was there. As far as I could judge the tree was about twenty yards from the house, thus while it was not near enough for me to hear much, it enabled me to see clearly.

I had not been there more than a minute when a light shot from the window again, and I was enabled to see the interior of the room. But this was of no great use to me, even although I saw on a table many things which were strange to me, and which even now I cannot describe. What was of interest to me was an old man carrying a candle. I could not see his face as plainly as I desired, for the panes of glass were small, while in the centre of each one was a large lump which wellnigh blurred any object which lay behind. Presently, however, I saw that one of the panes had been broken, and by means of this I was able to see clearly. But my range of vision was narrowed. As I have said the panes of glass were small, and so I could not see the whole of the room;

still, by means of supporting myself by holding the trunk of the tree and stretching as far as I could in each direction, I was able to obtain a view of a large part of the room.

After some trouble, therefore, I could see the old man's face more plainly. I saw that he was very old and looked dirty and unkempt beyond relief, his hair being in tangled wisps over his shoulders, while his beard seemed to wellnigh reach his waist. But old as he was there were no signs of decrepitude. His movements were quick and decided. His hands were steady, while there was an eager look on his face. His eyes were wellnigh hidden by his huge overhanging forehead and his bushy eyebrows, but as far as I could judge his sight was not dim.

No sooner had he entered than he was followed by another form. This I saw in spite of the badly made glass, but who it was I was not sure. It might have been a man, or a woman – I could not tell.

"The night is cold, come near the fire."

I heard these words plainly, but that was practically all I did hear during the time I was there. As I have said, the tree on which I was perched was twenty yards from the window, and except on this one occasion nearly everything was said in a low voice.

But his words enabled me to see who the other occupant of the room was, for at his behest the woman whom I had accompanied almost all the way from Folkestone town came to a part in the room where I could see her plainly. She had thrown off her headgear, and the heavy cloak which she had worn, and when I

saw her there I wondered more than ever what business she could have with this old man. I have said that I thought she was young when I saw her at first, but in the light of the candle which fell straight upon her face she did not look more than nineteen years old. Her hair had been disarranged by her journey, but I saw that it lay in curling richness over her head. In colour it was glossy brown, which was very near chestnut around the temples. Her features seemed to me the most noble I had ever gazed upon. It reminded me more of what I had read of the old Greek goddesses than of an Englishwoman. Every feature was clearly cut, and but for the look which seemed to me like despair which gleamed from her eyes, and rested on her face, I thought she would be beautiful beyond any one I had ever seen.

Presently they both drew near the fireplace, and both stood within the range of my vision at the same time. Then the strangeness of the situation came to me more vividly than ever. The old man with his long tangled locks of white hair, his head sunk in between his shoulders, his long beard wellnigh reaching the middle of his body, and with eager angry looks flashing from his deep sunk eyes, and the woman young and beautiful, her face clearly outlined, but pale as death, her hair like a flashing nimbus around her head, and her eyes fixed on the strange specimen of humanity before her.

As I have said, I could catch little or nothing of the purport of the conversation; but I saw that both looked eager and determined. Presently after the woman had been speaking the

man shrugged his shoulders, and laughed mockingly. He spread out his large bony hands deprecatingly and I could see from the expression on his face that he was telling her that it was impossible to grant the request.

Then she changed her attitude. She appeared to be angry and to threaten him. I saw her lift her right hand and point at him with her forefinger. She seemed also to be urging something that made him afraid, for I saw him look around the room like a man in fear. But this was only for a moment. By the time she had finished speaking he had regained his former self-possession and seemed to regard her threats as so many idle words.

Then I thought they changed places. He seemed to be making some request of her, a request which I thought put fear into her heart, although she yielded not to him. If she could not make him bend to her will neither could he make her bend to his. What impressed me, moreover, was the courage of this young girl. For although she might be the wife of the man at the inn, ay, and even obeyed him in unreasonable requests, she held her ground boldly before this old man living in the lonely house in the midst of the Pycroft woods. But the wonder of it was to me beyond words. A young girl fighting for her ends against this weird looking old man. What was the meaning of it?

Presently their conversation seemed to change again. I saw her point to the curious looking things which lay on the table, and this drew my attention to what seemed to me like glass tubes, several strange looking vases, and, what was to me more strange

and mysterious still, two human skulls. As she spoke he took up one of the skulls, and as far as I could judge began to tell her something of the horrible thing which he held in his hand.

To this she seemed to say something as if in protest for I heard his answer, in a harsh cracked voice.

"Let them. They who would harm me must know my secrets, and they who would know my secrets must penetrate the depths of this old brain. And can they, ah, can they?"

Her reply to this did not reach me plainly, but I gathered that she told him of men who for dealing with the powers of darkness had suffered at the stake.

"Burn me!" he cried, and his voice reached me clearly. "Let them try. Before a man is burnt, he confesses, and I would confess! Ay, I would confess such things as would bring many a high head low. Judges, judges. Ay, but who is the judge that would dare to anger me?"

He shook his fist angrily, while his long beard waved to and fro as he shook his head in rage.

After this I could gather nothing for a long time. Sometimes they moved to another part of the room and then I could see nothing but dim blurred figures behind the thick uneven glass, while their voices only reached me in low mutterings.

After a time they moved near the fireplace again, and then I saw another look upon the girl's face. I saw fear and anxiety which I had not noted before. Evidently he had told her of something, or she had somehow discovered something, that

moved her more deeply than anything which had gone before. The look on her face was pleading, and she held up her hands beseechingly. I saw, too, that the old man was evidently well pleased with himself, for I heard him give utterance to a pleased little cackle, which he intended for a laugh.

"And if I do, and if I do, little Constance, what then?"

Again she spoke eagerly, passionately I thought, while the look on his face became more and more full of self-satisfaction.

"Ah, ah," I heard him cackle, "so you discover that Old Solomon still hath his wits, eh? That his bow hath many strings, eh? That he hath not sold himself to the devil for naught, eh? Ah, ah, but it does an old man's heart good to see you, pretty little Constance."

I had discovered her name at last. Constance. At that time I could think of nothing sweeter, even although it was spoken by this withered, wrinkled old man in tones of ribaldry and mocking. Put it down to my youth if you will, but the knowledge of her name made me long to be her friend more than ever.

I looked away towards the eastward sky, and saw a faint glow in the horizon. Evidently morning was drawing near. In another hour the sun would have risen, and I began to wonder how the strange visit would end; but in another moment the thought of morning was driven from me, for I saw that the girl had fallen on her knees before the strange old creature. I caught no words, but that she pleaded with him was evident, while more than once I heard her sobbing. I saw too that he seemed to be relenting, nay,

I thought I saw even tenderness on his creased forbidding face, which was followed by a look of cunning.

"And if I do, what then?" I heard him say.

But of her answer I caught nothing, although I strained every nerve to catch even the faintest sound.

"More than that, more than that, pretty Constance," I heard him say. "Obedience, my pretty bird, obedience!"

And now I saw a look of terror in her eyes, yet did she keep on pleading until the old man seemed to make up his mind to grant her request.

I saw him leave the room, while she stood like one transfixed. She was standing where the light shone straight upon her face, so that I could see every feature, but nevertheless I could read no story thereon which revealed her secret. Courage I saw, tenderness I saw, nay, more it seemed to realize that it was not her own battle that she was fighting. What fear she had was not for herself. For who was it then? I could think of no one save the man at the inn, and there came into my head a great anger, and a desire to wrest the secret of his power over her from him.

What led her to the window, I wondered. Was it the faint twitter of the birds which began to bestir themselves at the rising of the King of Day, or did she give a thought to me who had promised to wait outside for her. I saw her place her face close against the glass and look steadily out. What was in her mind, I asked myself. Did the thought that I was near give her comfort or help? She could not see me, for it was yet dark and I was almost

hidden by the tree which I had climbed; nevertheless she kept her face there until she was attracted, even as I had been attracted, by a noise in the room.

She turned around quickly, and then I saw her move hastily away. She was now behind the thick uneven glass again, so that I could see nothing clearly, but I could have sworn that I saw another woman there. What she was like I could not tell, for she never came to that part of the room where I could see plainly. A minute later the woman who had been my companion left the room with the other, while the old man stood watching the door, with a look of doubt on his face, as if he doubted the wisdom of what he had done. A moment later he followed them, leaving the room in utter darkness.

CHAPTER VII
THE MYSTERY OF PYCROFT

I waited a few minutes, but no one came back to the room. Moreover dawn was now appearing; the birds were singing louder every minute; the silence of night was dying in the gladsomeness of a new day. I crept down from the tree, my mind wellnigh bewildered by what I had seen and heard. When I had left my home two days before I had no idea that I should so soon be enshrouded in the mists of mystery. Nay, a few hours before, when I had ridden up to the inn in Folkestone town, I did not dream that before sunrise new interests and new hopes would arise in my life. Yet so it was. At sundown my one hope was to find the clue to the hiding place of the marriage contract of the new king with Lucy Walters, now, although I had in no way abandoned the mission which inspired me when I set out, it had become interwoven with other interests which kindled my imagination and stirred my heart even more.

Who was that old man? Why did he live there all alone? What was the secret of that old house? What was the link that bound the woman I had accompanied hither with this strange old creature? Why had she come hither, and who was that other woman who had come into the room?

These and a hundred other questions haunted my mind as I

waited near the house, while both eyes and ears were open to every sight and sound. Almost unconsciously I crept away to the spot where I had separated from the woman, and this place being somewhat higher than the house gave me a full view of the building.

As day came on, the outlines of the house became more clear to me. I saw that it could scarcely be called a mansion, while on the other hand it was larger than a farmer's dwelling, nay for that matter it was evidently intended as the dwelling place of a man of importance. It was a low irregular building, built of stone, and was evidently of great strength. The doors were heavy and iron studded. The mullioned windows were so constructed that no one could enter through them. Moreover iron bars obtained everywhere; at no place, as far as I could see, could any one find an entrance, save at the will of those who dwelt within. An air of dilapidation reigned. There was no evidence anywhere that the place was inhabited. The paths were covered with weeds and grass. What were at one time flower gardens had become a wild mess. The grass grew in large quantities, while wild flowers were appearing in great profusion. But nowhere was human care visible.

The spring air blew fresh and cold, and although the birds sang blithely they did not dispel the feeling of desolation which everywhere reigned. Had I not seen those two women and the old man I should have said that Pycroft Hall had been deserted at least ten years. Nothing save birds and insects betokened life.

Not a bark of a dog, or the low of a cow even, could be heard. All told of lonely desolation.

In spite of myself I shivered. My clothes were wet with dew, and standing in the shadow of the trees as I was the rays from the rising sun did not reach me. Like a man dazed I crept to an open spot where the sun shone, but it seemed to give no heat. Bright spring morning though it might be it was deathly cold, and more than all, my heart was cold.

I waited in silence, how long I do not know, but it seemed a long time. Still I remained there, listening for the sound of footsteps, and for the presence of the woman. I made up my mind concerning the questions I should ask her. Cunning, searching questions I thought they were, such as would lead her, unknown to herself, to give me the clue to the secret which threw a shadow over her life. I planned how I could gain her confidence, and, presently, by my own wisdom and courage, free her from the weight which I felt sure was crushing her.

Meanwhile the sun rose higher and higher. The day was now fully come, and yet neither sight nor sound reached me.

"What is the meaning of this?" I asked myself. "She promised to cry out if she were in danger. She told me to wait for her."

I called to mind that she had said nothing concerning her future plans, or of her return to the inn at Folkestone. Then a thought came into my mind which dismayed me and determined me to take action. I therefore left the spot where I had been standing and crept closer and closer to the house. I did not

keep within sight of the windows. I feared to do so, not for my own sake but for hers, even although I did not know what harm I should be doing her by exposing myself to sight. Still I remembered how eagerly she had pleaded with me not to enter the house with her. I judged she was anxious that I should not be seen by the man with whom she had an interview that night.

I was not long in discovering, however, that my precautions were needless. No one appeared, and all was silent. Presently growing bolder I walked around the building. There was no sign that any living being save myself was near. Every door, every window was closed and bolted, and as I listened the silence of death seemed to reign in the old home of the Pycrofts.

"She is gone," I cried out like one bewildered, "but whither hath she gone? what hath happened to her?" But only the deathly silence of the deserted house made answer to the question which had unwittingly come to my lips.

At first I could scarcely realize it, and I could not help believing that the dread calamity at which she had hinted had befallen her while in the company of the man.

Presently I climbed to one of the windows, some of the panes of which were broken, and looked in. I saw only an empty and deserted room. It looked very dreary just then, although I doubt not that at one time it had rung with joyous revelry. It was a large dining hall, oak panelled and oak ceiled. The chimney piece, moreover, although black with age and smoke, was quaintly carved, while there were many other indications

that the builders of Pycroft Hall were people who loved things tasteful and pleasant to behold. I placed my ear to the broken pane also, but no sound could I hear. A silence like unto that of death reigned.

At this time all through which I had passed through the night seemed like a dream, and I felt like doubting the things which I have here set down. Especially was this so when, emboldened by the continuous silence, I gave a shout, which echoed and re-echoed through the forsaken rooms.

"What hath happened to her?" I asked myself again and again, and each time I asked the question the more difficult did the answer become.

Presently I took a more commonplace view of the matter. "Doubtless she hath gone back to Folkestone," I said to myself; "perchance, moreover, the other woman I saw hath gone back with her, while the old man hath accompanied them a part of the way. After all the woman did not promise to return to me. She did not ask me to accompany her; rather it was against her will that she allowed me to walk by her side. Perhaps if I make haste I shall overtake them before they reach the *Barley Sheaf*."

But although I said this I did not leave the place at the time the determination was born in my mind. There still remained lingering doubts whether she was not immured in this lonely house, and whether she might not even then be needing my aid. But after I had again made a journey around the building, I was led to the conclusion that it was deserted. I would have given

much to have entered, so that I might have set my doubts at rest, but as I have said, every door was closed and bolted, while every window was so barricaded that no man might enter except after great preparations.

I therefore presently turned back disappointed and weary; the woman, the pathway of whose life I had so strangely crossed, had willed to go away without telling me whither she had gone, or perchance she had been compelled to do the will of the man with whom I had seen her in the room opposite the fir tree.

There seemed no reason why I should trouble about this, yet I did. A great weight rested upon my heart and, even when I had left the Pycroft woods and was out on the main road again and saw the clear blue sky above me, I was oppressed by what had taken place and I accused myself of being unfaithful to the promise I had made.

What o'clock it was when I reached Folkestone town I know not, but it was yet early, for but few people were stirring, neither did the inmates of the tavern seem to have aroused themselves from the carousal of the previous night. I found the main door opened, however, so I entered as carelessly as I was able, in the hope that if any one appeared I might give the impression that I had gone out for an early morning walk. But no man molested me as I found my way to the chamber which had been allotted to me, neither could I hear a sound coming from the adjoining room. All was perfectly still.

I went into the corridor and listened intently, but no man

stirred. If the man, the thought of whom aroused angry feelings in my heart, slept near me, he must have slept as peacefully as a child.

After a time I heard the sound of bustle and movement in the rooms beneath me, and then, although the thought of food had never entered my mind during the night, I felt a great hunger. I therefore made my way down stairs, where great steaks of ham fresh from the frying pan were speedily set before me.

"A fine morning," I said to the maid who brought them.

"Ay, it feels like summer," she replied.

"Are there many people here who have been sleeping at the inn to-night."

"I dunnow," and with that she left the room.

I thought the maid desired not to answer my question, but this, while it aroused suspicions in my mind did not keep me from eating a hearty breakfast. Moreover, I felt neither tired nor sleepy. My journey of ten miles, my long watching and waiting, seemed to have affected me not one whit, and when I had finished breakfast I had no more weariness than when I had left my home two days before. In spite of my anxiety, too, I felt strangely light of heart, and as the sunlight streamed into the room I found myself humming a song.

"Good morning to you, young master, and a good appetite."

It was the landlord who spoke, the very man I wanted to see.

"The same to you Master Landlord," I replied.

"Ay, but I spoiled my appetite an hour ago, young master. An

innkeeper must needs be an early riser."

"Ay, I suppose so," I made answer, blessing my stars that the man had given me the very opening which I desired. "Doubtless some of your guests have taken leave of you this morning."

"As to that, no, young master."

"Ah, no one has left you to-day?"

"No, not to-day."

"That is lucky for me," I said, "for I had fears lest one of your guests whom I wanted to see had left before I had a chance of speaking to him."

"And which might that be, if I am not making too bold in asking?" he said, and I thought his eyes searched my face curiously.

"The Cavalier who rode up last night with a lady."

"Ah, but which?"

"I saw but one," I made answer. "He came up even while the groom was unsaddling my own horse. A tall man, with black hair just turning grey. He wore a grey feather in his hat, and his sword was jewel hilted."

"That description might apply to many a traveller who puts up here," he replied. "His name, young master, his name?"

"As to his name," I replied, for here the man had found a weak place in my armour, "well there may be reasons for not mentioning it."

"I have naught to do with nameless wanderers, young master, and thank God the country will have less than ever to do with

them since England's true king is coming back. Each traveller who comes to this inn gives his name as a gentleman should. It is well known for five miles around, ay, fifty for that matter, among those who travel, that *The Barley Sheaf* bears a name second to none. Its sack is of the best, its company the best, while neither footpad nor traitor is ever welcomed within its walls."

The man spoke as I thought with unnecessary warmth. There seemed no reason why he should be so anxious to defend the character of the house before a youth like myself, who made no charge against it.

"Methinks he does protest too much," I said to myself, calling to mind the words of Master Will Shakespeare, whose writings had been little read during Cromwell's time, but whose plays I had often read with much delight. Still I remembered my father's advice, and determined to arouse no suspicion in his mind.

"I heard of that before I came hither," I replied. "As to the sack, and the company, I made acquaintance with both last night, and that with rare pleasure. Nevertheless a man doth not blazon his name on the walls of every inn he enters. Even King Charles II, who is expected to land at Dover before many days are over, had often to enter places like this under an assumed name, as every one knows right well. And, even although times will be changed at his return, it may be that many a man, while he may give his name to such as yourself, will not care to shout it aloud to the tapster or the ostler."

"Ay there is reason in that," replied the innkeeper, "and I

perceive that young as you are you are a gentleman of rare wit."

"As to that, mine host," I made answer, "I may not boast, still I have wit enough to know that it may not always be best to speak names aloud in an inn, although the king will be in England soon."

"God bless King Charles II, and down with all psalm-singing traitors," he cried fervently.

"Amen to that," I cried; "down with all traitors whether they sing psalms or no. But to come to my question, since the worshipful gentleman whom I have described hath not had the misfortune to be obliged to leave this hospitable house, I trust you will take my name to him, with the request that I may enjoy a few minutes of his company."

"You mean the gentleman who rode a grey horse with a grey feather in his hat, and carried a jewelled hilted sword?"

"Ay, I mean him. He was accompanied by a lady, who wore a long cloak, and whose face was wellnigh hidden by her headgear; I heard him ask you for private rooms as he entered."

"But did you not know?"

"Know what?"

"That he left last night at midnight."

"At midnight?"

"Ay, a messenger came bearing him important news, and although the lady had gone to bed he had to arouse her, ay, and the ostler too for that matter. Both their horses were saddled, and they rode away at one o' th' clock, but whither they have gone

I know not."

At this I was silent, for I knew that the man had told a lie.

"But what would you?" continued the innkeeper. "We shall have bustling times now, and the innkeeper's trade will be brisk, so he must not grumble. Besides, he paid his count like a prince, and would not take the silver change which he could rightfully claim."

Now this brought me to a deadlock, as can be seen. I dared not ask direct questions, first because I did not wish to arouse suspicions, and next because I feared by so doing I should shew my state of utter ignorance concerning the man about whom I inquired. Still when one is twenty-three one does not lack confidence, and youth will dare to rush bareheaded where an older man would hesitate to enter with a steel head-cap.

"Ah, I would I had known," I replied. "I could perhaps have told him that his danger was not so great as he imagined."

At this he started like one surprised, while his eyes flashed a look of inquiry.

"Danger?" he said questioningly. "What danger, young sir?"

"Better not give it a name," I made answer. "Besides I do not know how much he hath told you, and I would betray no man's secrets. Solomon said many wise things and wrote them down in a book, and Solomon, whom some call a fool," here I stopped, and looked into his face, "although his writings are placed among the holy Scriptures, said that there was a time to hold one's peace as well as to speak."

"Solomon had many ways of obtaining knowledge," he said, almost timidly I thought.

"Ay, some have said that they were means known only to himself."

I could have sworn that the man trembled. Whether I was getting any nearer the truth or no I knew not, but I was sure that my words were construed by the innkeeper in such a way that he fancied I was the possessor of the secret he had sought to hide. Still the man doubted me, and he did not seem inclined to offer any information.

"God save King Charles II," he said, as though he thought I doubted his loyalty.

"Amen to that," I replied. Then I continued quietly, still watching him: "Charles is a good name, whether borne by a king or another man."

Now whether he was too thick in the head to understand the drift of my words, or whether I was on the wrong track I know not; whatever may be the truth he suddenly left the room, craving pardon for leaving me so abruptly, and assuring me that he had many things to attend to that morning.

Alone again, I had time to collect my thoughts. The landlord's communication if true, left me more in the dark than ever. That he had told me lies I knew, but whether it was a lie that the man had left the inn I had not yet been able to discover. I called to mind the words I had heard spoken in the bedchamber next to my own, and remembered that the man had told the woman to return

early in the morning before any one was astir. Would he, having given such commands, depart at midnight leaving her alone and helpless?

In truth the mystery in which I had become involved seemed to entangle me more than ever. Then I called myself a fool for not taking a necessary step, and one which would have occurred immediately to any one that was not half-witted.

I hurried to the stables, and there I found that, whether the landlord had spoken truly or no, the horses which had brought the man and woman the previous night were gone. Only my own stood there eating her fill of oats. I went to her and patted her, and then looked round for some evidence which might tell me how long it was since the others were taken away. But nothing could I see. The stable was cleaned, and every mark that they had been there was taken away.

The ostler entered as I made the examination.

"No horses here beside mine, ostler?"

"No sir; I had to get up in the middle of the night to saddle two which came about the same time as yours. I was rare and tired too. But there was a lady in the question, and you are old enough to know that what a woman wills will have to be."

"Ay," I replied with a laugh, wondering whether his information had not been given at the command of the innkeeper.

I therefore pretended to take no further notice of the fellow; nevertheless I kept him within sight, and presently when I saw him go up to the landlord, as though he had some special

communication to make, I drew my own conclusions.

Nevertheless I was at my wits' end what to do. I had done all that was in my power, but as yet I had found out nothing. The man and the woman had crossed my path, and the man had gone without my speaking a word to him. But the case of the woman was different. I had seen her and spoken to her. I had heard the note of pain and anguish in her voice, I had watched her face as she spoke with the old man at Pycroft Hall, the man who my father believed held the secret of the king's marriage. But she had gone, leaving no trace behind. What was the meaning of it all? I wandered over the cliffs which border the sea at Folkestone, and presently my thoughts became more clear. If the old man possessed the secret of the king's marriage he also possessed the secret of the woman's life. It was true I had not been able to enter Pycroft Hall that morning but it might be that he would again visit it during the night. Well I would go to the old place again that night, and if the light shone at the window, I would demand admittance and then trust to my own courage and wit to meet whatever I might happen to see.

CHAPTER VIII
HOW I ENTERED PYCROFT

Directly I had made up my mind to pay a second visit to Pycroft Hall my spirits rose, and my heart grew warm. The thought of meeting the weird old creature, and speaking with him face to face, stirred my blood, and kindled my imagination. Moreover, for the first time the new king's marriage contract became real to me. For what did not come to me through the night came to me on the cliffs. And this I have found since then; it is when I have a sense of freedom that I am able to think. When I am beneath tall trees, or imprisoned within stone walls, my mind refuses to grasp the issues of things. But when I stand in the light, in God's open places, not only does my natural vision widen, but also the vision of mind and soul becomes more keen and has greater range. The thoughts which a man thinks in the dark, and in cramped places, are smaller than those which come to him beneath the great dome of the sky, when the wind blows free, and naught belittles his sight. At least this hath always been the case with me. When I would think the best thoughts I am capable of thinking, I long to live in a large place where the sunlight is strong.

Through the night I had wondered blindly what drew the woman to Pycroft Hall, and what was in the man's mind who sent

her there, but no answer came to me. Now, as I walked along the cliffs, in sight of the great sea whose waters flashed brightly in the light of the early summer's sun, I thought of many reasons. And this among others: If my father, and Katharine Harcomb, and Lucy Walters' mother had heard of Pycroft Hall, and of Elijah Pycroft, why not others? If I had been led to try and obtain power over the king might not others? If the man who had sent the woman to Pycroft at night were Sir Charles Denman, a man upon whom the king's anger rested, would he not desire to move heaven and earth to possess a secret whereby he could make terms with his monarch? If I had heard of the king's marriage contract he also had heard of it, and had sent his wife to obtain knowledge of the thing. But why had he sent her? To this many answers came. For one thing he was afraid, and for another he believed that this beauteous woman would succeed where he had failed. Besides his power over her was great. She also lived in great fear, and he used that fear in order to make her obey his behests.

All this seemed so natural that I called myself a fool for not thinking of it before. Why had I allowed my opportunities to slip through my hands? Besides, might not the woman have succeeded? What was the meaning of the other woman entering? And more, whither had they gone?

But this did not trouble me much. There was no sign of victory on the woman's face. Had she gained possession of such papers she would have revealed her victory, whereas I had seen her face

the moment before the other woman had appeared, and it told only of yearnings and the shadow of a great fear.

I am putting down these thoughts here, so that those who may hap to read this may see the position in which I was placed, and the difficulties that stood in my way. I am aware also that those whose thoughts are clearer, and whose minds are better balanced than mine, may have good reason for thinking that I had acted foolishly, and had taken altogether the wrong way to accomplish my purpose. I would have them remember, however, that I was but a lad of twenty-three, and that youth is not famed for its discretion. Moreover, as I look back now, I wonder what I could have done whereby I could better have accomplished the thing I had set out to accomplish.

Before I had been on the cliffs an hour, I had made my plans, and these I started to carry out without delay. First of all I went back to the stable and had my horse saddled, and having ridden four miles in the direction of Pycroft Hall, I cast my eyes around in the hope of seeing some one. But no one was in sight. The neighbourhood was thinly inhabited. Not a horseman was to be seen on the road, not a labourer was working in the fields. I found out afterwards that practically the whole country side had emptied itself in order to be present at the landing of the king at Dover. That not knowing the exact day of his coming they had gone to Dover a few days in advance so that they might be certain to be there to give him a royal welcome. In truth I found out that for a full week before the king came the town of Dover was a

huge fair, and that revelry continued from midnight to midnight without ceasing.

Presently, however, I caught sight of a man who was cutting wood by one of the fences some distance away, whereupon I rode across the fields to the place where he was.

He looked at me attentively, and then held the tool with which he worked in such a way that I imagined he thought I meant to attack him.

"You be young for your work, young master," he said, eyeing me grimly.

"Why?" I asked pleasantly.

"Otherwise you would never come to a working man who has not a groat in his pouch," he replied.

"Why, you think I am a footpad?" I asked.

"Else why should you gallop across hedges and ditches as though the devil were behind you? Eh, young man, give it up. It only ends in the gallows, and it must be a fearful life to live, always seeing the rope's end dangling before your eyes."

"Instead of wanting to take your groats from you, my man, I will e'en give you one instead. Nay, believe me, I am peaceably inclined, and instead of being a highwayman I am making inquiries about an old house which I am told is empty, and which may perchance be for sale."

Again he looked at me, and then touched his hat respectfully.

"You be from London, young master?"

"I left London less than a week ago," I replied. "I have come

in search of a house, and I have been told there is one near here, which being empty and forsaken, a man might buy cheaply."

"The name o't, young master?" he said questioningly.

"It is called Pycroft, or some such name," I replied.

"And is it Pycroft you thought of buying, young master?"

"Rather, I am come to ask questions about it."

At this he laughed. "No man will ever live at Pycroft," he said.

"Why? Is not the house a good one?"

"It's the company, not the house I was thinking of."

"The company?"

"Many and many's the one who has thought of living at Pycroft, but no man hath dared. Through the day it's right eno', but at night the trouble begins. There is not a witch for twenty miles around but gets her marks at Pycroft; there's not a witches' revel but is held there, and as every man knows after they have met at their revels the devilry begins. The corn is blighted, the cows give no milk, the murrain blights the stock, children have the rickets, and everything goes wrong. I have heard that it can be bought for an old song, but no man will buy it. Through the day it seems all quiet and restful, but at night-time blue fires have been seen there, awful smells come from there, ay, and the devil hath been seen there."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.