

Baroness Emma Orczy

The Tangled Skein



Emma Orczy

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Orczy Emmuska Orczy, Baroness The Tangled Skein

DEDICATION

TO MY LITTLE SON JACK

AND

TO HIS SCHOOLMATES AT "RAMSBURY"

BIRCHINGTON-ON-SEA

Dear Boys,

It was amongst you all that I wrote the last chapters of this romance. To you, therefore – to your growing manhood, your pretty, budding thoughts of chivalry and honour, which I so loved to see developing in the tender atmosphere of your dear little school-home by the sea – I inscribe and dedicate this record of a noble and good man's life.

Emmuska Orczy.

Birchington-on-Sea

February, 1907

PART I

MIRRAB – THE WITCH

CHAPTER I

EAST MOLESEY FAIR

Even Noailles, in his letters to his royal master, admits that the weather was glorious, and that the climatic conditions left nothing to be desired.

Even Noailles! Noailles, who detested England as the land of humid atmospheres and ill-dressed women!

Renard, who was more of a diplomatist and kept his opinions on the fogs and wenches of Old England very much to himself, declared enthusiastically in his letter to the Emperor Charles V, dated October 2nd, 1553, that never had he seen the sky so blue, the sun so bright, nor the people of this barbarous island more merry than on the memorable first day of East Molesey Fair: as all who will, may read for themselves in Vol. III of the Granvelle Papers: —

"Aulcungs ne pourroient contempler ciel plus bleu soleil plus brillianct ni peuple plus joieult."

Yet what have we to do with the opinions of these noble ambassadors of great and mighty foreign monarchs?

Our own chroniclers tell us that East Molesey Fair was the maddest, merriest, happiest time the goodly folk of the Thames Valley had had within memory of the oldest inhabitant.

Was not good Queene Marye, beloved daughter of the great King Henry VIII, crowned at last? crowned in Westminster Abbey, as all her loyal subjects had desired that she should be, despite His Grace of Northumberland and his treasonable faction, whom God and the Queene's most lawful Majesty would punish all in good time?

In the meanwhile let us be joyful and make merry!

Such a motley crowd as never was seen. Here's a sheriff from London City, pompous and dignified in dark doublet and hose, with scarlet mantle and velvet cap; beside him his lady trips right merrily, her damask kirtle held well above her high-heeled shoes, her flowered paniers looped in the latest style, with just the suggestion of a farthingale beneath her robes, to give dignity to her figure and value to the slimness of her waist.

Here a couple of solemn burgesses in velvet cloaks edged with fur, and richly slashed doublets, are discussing the latest political events; whilst a group of Hampton merchants, more soberly clad, appraise the wares of a cutler lately hailed from Spain.

Then the dames and maidens with puffed paniers of blue or vivid scarlet, moving swiftly from booth to booth, babbling like so many gaily-plumaged birds, squabbling with the vendors and chaffing the criers.

Here and there the gaudy uniform of one of the liveried Companies will attract the eye, anon the dark cloak and close black mask which obviously hides the Court gallant.

Men of all ranks and of all stations have come out to East Molesey to-day. Merchants, shopkeepers, workers, aldermen and servants, all with their womenkind, all with pouches more or less well filled, for who would go to Molesey Fair but to spend money, to drink, to eat, or to make merry?

Then there were the 'prentices!

They had no money to spend, save a copper or so to throw to a mountebank, but nevertheless they contrived to enjoy themselves right royally.

Such imps of mischief!

No whipping-post to-day! Full licence for all their pranks and madcap jokes. The torment of all these worthy burgesses out on a holiday.

Oh! these 'prentices!

Hundreds of them out here this afternoon. They've come down from Esher and Hampton, Kingston and Westminster and London City, like so many buzzing insects seeking whom they can annoy.

Now on the ground, suddenly tripping a pompous dame off her feet; anon in rows, some half-dozen of them, elbow to elbow, head foremost, charging the more serious crowd, and with a hoot and a yell scattering it like a number of frightened goslings. Yet again at the confection booth, to the distraction of the vendors of honey-cakes, stealing sugar-plums and damson cheese, fighting, quarrelling, screeching, their thin legs encased in hose of faded blue or grey worsted, their jerkins loose, their shirt sleeves flapping in the breeze, a cool note of white amidst the dark-coloured gowns of the older men.

Heavens above! what a to-do!

A group of women be-coiffed, apparelled in best kirtles and modish shoes, were pressing round a booth where pantoufles, embroidered pouches, kerchiefs, and velveted paniers were laid out in tempting array.

Just beyond, a number of buxom country wenches, with round red arms, showing bare to the grilling sun, and laughing eyes, aglow with ill-concealed gourmandise, were gaping at a mighty display of pullets, hares, and pigeons, sides of roebuck and haunches of wild boar, ready spiked, trussed, and skewered, fit to tempt Her Majesty's Grace's own royal palate.

Sprigs of sweet-scented marjoram, thyme, and wool-blade tastefully disposed, further enhanced the attractions of this succulent show. 'Twas enough to make the sweetest mouth water with anticipatory delight. A brown-eyed, apple-cheeked wench in paniers of brilliant red was unaffectedly licking her pretty lips.

"This way, mistress, this way!" shouted the vendor of these appetizing wares. A sturdy fellow, he, with ginger-coloured pate, and wielding a long narrow-bladed knife in his fleshy hand. "This way! a haunch of buck from the royal vinery! a hare from Her Liege Majesty's own chase! a pullet from – "

"Nay, thou gorbellied knave!" responded a vendor of drugs and herbs close by, whose stall was somewhat deserted, and whose temper was obviously suffering – "Nay! an thou speakest the truth thou art a thief, but if not, then thou'rt a liar! In either case art fit for the hangman's rope!"

"This way, my masters! this way!" came in loud, stentorian cries from a neighbouring booth; "this way for Peter the juggler, the greatest conjurer the world has ever seen!"

"This way! I pray you, worthy sirs!" this from yet another place of entertainment, "this way for John the tumbler!"

"Peter the juggler will swallow a cross-bow of steel before your very eyes!" shouted one crier.

"John the tumbler will climb Saint Ethelburga's steeple without help of rope or ladder," called the other.

"Peter will show you how to shoe a turkey, how to put salt on a swallow's tail, and how to have your cake and eat it!"

"John will sit on two stools without coming to the ground!"

"Marry! and ye both lie faster than my mule can trot!" came in hilarious accents from one of the crowd.

"And Peter the juggler will show thee how to make thy mule trot faster than thou canst lie, friend," responded Peter's crier unabashed, "and a mighty difficult task 'twill be, I'll warrant."

Laughing, joking, ogling like some fickle jade, the crowd passed from booth to booth: now dropping a few coins in Peter the juggler's hat, now watching the antics of John the tumbler; anon looking on amazed, half terrified at the evolutions of a gigantic brown bear, led by the nose by a

vigorous knave in leather jerkin and cross-gartered hose, and accompanied by a youngster who was blowing on a mighty sackbut until his cheeks looked nigh to bursting.

But adsheart! who shall tell of all the attractions which were set forth on that memorable day before the loyal subjects of good Queene Marye?

There were the trestles where one could play at ball and knuckle-bone, or chance and mumchance; another, where evens and odds and backgammon proved tempting. He who willed could tilt at Weekie, play quoits or lansquenet, at ball or at the billiards, or risk his coppers on such games as one-and-thirty, or at the pass ten; he might try his skill, too, at throwing the dart, or his strength at putting the stone.

There were mountebanks and quacksalvers, lapidaries at work, and astrologers in their tents. For twopence one could have a bout with the back-sword or the Spanish tuck, could watch the situations and conjunctions of the fixed stars and the planets, could play a game of tennis or pelitrigone, or be combed and curled, perfumed and trimmed so as to please a dainty mistress's eye.

And through it all the loud bang! bang! bang! of the big drums, the criers proclaiming the qualities of their wares, the jarring notes of the sackbut and the allman flute, the screechy viol and the strident nine-hole pipe, all playing against one another, each striving to drown the other, and mingling with the laughter of the crowd, the yells of the 'prentices, the babble of the women, formed a huge volume of ear-splitting cacophony which must have been heard from one end of the country to the other.

All was noise, merriment, and laughter, save in one spot – an out-of-the-way, half-hidden corner of the fair, where the sister streams, the Ember and the Mole, join hands for a space, meet but to part again, and whence the distant towers and cupolas of Hampton Court appeared like those of a fairy palace floating in mid-ether, perched high aloft in the shimmering haze of this hot late summer's afternoon.

CHAPTER II

THE WITCH'S TENT

There are many accounts still extant of the various doings at East Molesey Fair on this 2nd of October in the year of our Lord 1553, and several chroniclers – Renard is conspicuous among the latter – make mention of the events which very nearly turned the gay and varying comedies of that day into weird and tragic drama.

Certainly the witch's tent was a mistake.

But what would you? No doubt the worthy individual, who for purposes of mystification called himself "Abra," had tried many means of earning a livelihood before he and his associate in business took to the lucrative, yet dangerous trade of necromancy.

He was tall and gaunt, with hooked nose and deep-sunk eyes; he had cultivated a long, grey beard, and could call forth the powers of Mirrab the Witch with a remarkably solemn and guttural voice.

As for Mirrab herself, no one was allowed to see her. That was part of the business. She was a witch, a dealer in magic potions, charms and philters, a reader of the stars, and – softly be it spoken – a friend and companion of the devil! She only appeared enveloped in a thick veil, with divining wand held lightly in her hand, the ends of her gold tresses alone visible below the heavy covering which swathed her head.

It was the mystery of it all – cheap devices at best – which from the first had irritated the country-folk who thronged the Fair.

The tent itself was unlike any other ever seen at East Molesey. It stood high upon a raised wooden platform, to which a few rough steps gave access. On the right was a tall flagstaff, with black flag emblazoned with white skull and cross-bones, fluttering lazily in the breeze.

On the left a huge elm tree, with great heavy branches overshadowing the tent, had been utilized to support a placard bearing the words —

"Mirrab! the World-famed Necromancer!"

Sale of Magic Charms and Love Philters

Horoscope Casting and Elixir of Life!"

Perched on the platform, and assisted by a humbler henchman, armed with big drum and cymbals, the worthy Abra, in high-peaked cap and flowing mantle covered with strange devices, had all day long invited customers to his booth by uttering strange, mysterious promises.

"This way, this way, my masters," he would say with imposing solemnity; "the world-famous necromancer, Mirrab, will evoke for you the spirits of Mars, of Saturn, or of the moon."

"She will show you the Grand Grimorium..!"

Now what was the Grand Grimorium? The very sound of the words suggested some agency of the devil; no Christian man had ever heard or spoken of the Grand Grimorium.

"She will show you the use of the blasting rod and the divining wand. She will call forth the elementary spirits.."

Some people would try to laugh. Who had ever heard of the elementary spirits? Perhaps if some of the more enlightened town worthies happened to be nigh the booth, one or two of them would begin to chaff the necromancer.

"And prithee, friend wizard," a solemn burgher would suggest, "prithee what are the elementary spirits?"

But Abra was nothing if not ready-witted.

"The elementary spirits," he would explain with imperturbable gravity, "are the green butterfly, the black pullet, the queen of the hairy flies, and the screech owl."

The weird nomenclature was enough to make any one's hair stand on end. Even the sedate burgesses would shake their heads and silently edge away, whilst their womenkind would run swiftly past the booth, muttering a quick *Ave* to the blessed Virgin or kissing the Holy Scapulary hung beneath their kerchiefs, as their terrified glances met the cabalistic signs on the black flag.

The humbler country-folk frankly spat upon the ground three times whenever they caught sight of the flag, and that is a sure way of sending the devil about his business.

The shadows now were beginning to lengthen.

The towers and cupolas of Hampton Court Palace were studded with gold and gems by the slanting rays of the setting sun.

It had been a glorious afternoon and, except in the open space immediately in front of the witch's tent, the fun of the fair had lost none of its zest.

The witch's booth alone was solitary – weird-looking beneath the spreading branches of the overhanging elm.

The tent seemed lighted from within, for as the evening breeze stirred its hangings, gleams of brilliant red, more glowing than the sunset, appeared in zigzag streaks between its folds.

Behind, and to the right and left of it, the gentle murmur of the sister streams sounded like ghostly whisperings of evening sprites, busy spreading their grey mantles over the distant landscape.

As the afternoon wore on, the crowd in the other parts of the Fair had grown more and more dense, and now, among the plainer garb of the burgesses and townsfolk, and the jerkins and worsted hose of the yokels, could be seen quite frequently a silken doublet or velvet trunk, a masked face perhaps beneath a plumed bonnet, or the point of a sword gleaming beneath the long, dark mantle, denoting the Court gallant.

Now and then, too, hooded and closely swathed forms would flit quickly through the crowd, followed by the inquisitive glances of the humbler folk, as the dainty tip of a brodered shoe or the richly wrought hem of a silken kirtle, protruding below the cloak, betrayed the lady of rank and fashion on gay adventure bent.

Most of these veiled figures had found their way up the rough wooden steps which led to the witch's tent. The fame of Mirrab, the Soothsayer, had reached the purlieu of the palace, and Abra, the magician, had more than once seen his lean palm crossed with gold.

"This way, noble lords! this way!"

He was even now trying to draw the attention of two cloaked figures, who had just emerged in sight of the booth.

Two gentlemen of the Court evidently, for Abra's quick eye had caught a glimpse of richly chased sword-hilts, as the wind blew the heavy, dark mantles to one side.

But these gentlemen were paying little heed to the worthy magician's blandishments. They were whispering excitedly to one another, whilst eagerly scanning the crowd all round them.

"They were ladies from the Court, I feel sure," said the taller man of the two; "I swear I have seen the hem of that kirtle before."

"Carramba!" replied the other, "it promised well, but methinks we've lost track of them now."

He spoke English very fluently, yet with a strong, guttural intonation, whilst the well-known Spanish oath which he uttered betrayed his nationality.

"Pardi!" he added impatiently, "I could have sworn that the damsels were bent on consulting the witch."

"Nay, only on seeing the fun of the Fair apparently," rejoined the other; "we've lain in wait here now for nigh on half an hour."

"Mirrab the Soothsayer will evoke for you the spirits of the moon, oh noble lords!" urged Abra, with ever-increasing persuasiveness. "She will give you the complaisance of the entire female sex."

"What say you, my lord," said the Englishman after a while, "shall we give up the quest after those elusive damsels and woo these obliging spirits of the moon? They say the witch has marvellous powers."

"Bah, milor!" rejoined the Spaniard gaily, "a veiled female! Think on it! Those who have entered yon mysterious tent declare that scarce an outline of that soothsayer could they glean, beneath the folds of thick draperies which hide her from view. What is a shapeless woman? I ask you, milor. And in England, too," he added with affected gallantry which had more than a touch of sarcasm in it, "where all women are shapely."

"Mirrab, the world-famous necromancer, will bring to your arms the lady of your choice, oh most noble lords!" continued the persistent Abra, "even if she were hidden beyond the outermost corners of the earth."

"By my halidame! this decides me," quoth the Englishman merrily. "I pray you come, my lord. This adventure promises better than the other. And, who knows?" he added in his turn with thinly-veiled, pleasant irony, "you Spaniards are so persuasive – the witch, if she be young and fair, might lift her veil for you."

"Allons!" responded the other, "since 'tis your wish, milor, let us consult the spirits."

And, standing aside with the courtly grace peculiar to those of his nationality, he allowed his companion to precede him up the steps which led to Mirrab's tent.

Then he too followed, and laughing and chattering the two men disappeared behind the gaudily painted draperies.

Not, however, without tossing a couple of gold pieces into the hands of the wizard. Abra, obsequious, smiling, thoroughly contented, sat himself down to rest awhile beside his patient, hard-worked henchman.

CHAPTER III

MISCHIEF BREWING

At some little distance from the mysterious booth a trestle table had been erected, at which some three or four wenches in hooped paniers and short, striped kirtles, were dispensing spiced ale and sack to the thirsty village folk.

Here it was that Mirrab the witch and her attendant wizard were most freely discussed – with bated breath, and with furtive glances cast hurriedly at the black flag, which was just visible above the row of other booths and gayer attractions of the Fair.

There was no doubt that as the evening began to draw in, and the sun to sink lower and lower in the west, the superstitious terror, which had all along set these worthy country yokels against the awesome mysteries of the necromancer's tent, had gradually culminated into a hysterical frenzy.

At first sullen looks had been cast towards that distant spot, whence the sound of Abra's perpetual "This way, noble lords, this way!" came every now and then as a weird and ghostly echo; but now muttered curses and even a threatening gesture from time to time had taken the place of angry silence.

As the hard pates of these louts became heated with the foaming ale, their tempers began to rise, and the girls, with characteristic love of mischief and gossip, were ready enough to add fuel to the smouldering flames.

There was also present in the minds of these wenches an obvious feeling of jealousy against this mysterious veiled witch, who had proved so attractive to the Court gallants who visited the Fair.

Her supposed charms so carefully hidden beneath thick draperies, were reputed to be irresistible, and Mistress Dorothy, Susan, and Joan, who showed their own pretty faces unblushingly, were not sufficiently versed in mountebanks' tricks to realize that Mirrab's thick veil was, without doubt, only a means for arousing the jaded curiosity of idlers from the Court.

Be that as it may, it was an established fact that no one had seen the soothsayer's face, and that Mistress Dorothy, who was pouring out a huge tankard of sack for her own attendant swain, was exceedingly annoyed thereby.

"Bah!" she said contemptuously, as Abra and his magic devices were being discussed at the table, "he is but a lout. I tell thee, Matthew, that thou'rt a fool to take count of him. But the woman," she added under her breath, "is possessed of the devil."

Matthew, the shoemaker, took the tankard, which his sweetheart had filled for him, in both hands and took a long draught before he made any reply. Then he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, spat upon the ground, and looked significantly at the circle of friends who were gathered round him.

"I tell you, my masters," he said at last with due solemnity, "that I saw that witch last night fly out from yonder tree astride upon a giant bat."

"A bat?"

A holy shudder went round the entire assembly. Pretty Mistress Susan crossed herself furtively, whilst Joan in her terror nearly dropped the handful of mugs which she was carrying.

Every one hung on the shoemaker's lips.

Short and somewhat tubby of body, Matthew had a round and chubby face, with pale blue, bulging eyes, and slightly elevated eyebrows, which gave him the appearance of an overgrown baby. He was for some reason, which has never transpired to this day, reputed to have wonderful wisdom. His items of news, gleaned from a nephew who was scullion in the royal kitchen, were always received with boundless respect, whilst the connection itself gave him a certain social superiority of which he was proudly conscious.

Like the true-born orator, Matthew had paused a moment in order to allow the full strength of his utterance to sink into the minds of his hearers.

"Aye!" he said after a while, "she flew out from between the branches and up towards the full moon, clad only –"

A brusque movement and a blush from Mistress Dorothy here stopped the graphic flow of his eloquence.

"Er – hem – !" he concluded more tamely, "I saw her quite plainly."

"More shame then on thee, master," retorted Dorothy, whose wrath was far from subsiding, "for thus gazing on the devil's work."

But the matter had become of far too great import to allow of feminine jealousies being taken into account.

"And I know," added an elderly matron with quaking voice, "that my sister Hannah's child caught sight of the witch outside her tent this morning, and forthwith fell into convulsions, the poor innocent lamb."

"She hath the evil eye, depend on it," quoth Dorothy decisively.

The men said nothing. They were sipping their ale in sullen silence, and looking to Matthew for further expressions of wisdom.

"Those evil spirits have oft a filthy countenance," explained the shoemaker sententiously, "and no doubt 'twas they helped to convulse Mistress Hannah's child. Some have four faces – one in the usual place, another at the back of the head, and one looking out on either side; others appear with a tall and lean body and bellow like a bull."

"Hast seen them, Matthew?" came in awed whispers from those around.

"Nay! God and the Holy Virgin forbid!" protested Matthew fervently. "God forbid that I should enter their abode of evil. I should lose my soul."

There was a long, ominous silence, broken only by quickly muttered invocations to the saints and to Our Lady.

The men looked furtively at one another. The women clung together, not daring to utter a sound. Mistress Dorothy, all the boldness gone out of her little heart, was sobbing from sheer fright.

"Friends," said Matthew at last, as if with sudden resolution, "if that woman be possessed of the devil, what's to be done?"

There was no reply, but obviously they all understood one another, for each wore a shame-faced look all of a sudden, and dared not meet his neighbour's eye. But the danger was great. The devil in their midst would mean poisoned wells, the sweating sickness, some dire calamity for sure; and it was the duty of every true-hearted countryman to protect his home and family from such terrible disasters.

Therefore when Matthew in his wisdom said, "What's to be done?" the men fully understood.

The women, too, knew that mischief was brewing. They drew closer to one another and shivered with cold beneath their kerchiefs, in spite of the warmth of this beautiful late summer's afternoon.

"Beware of her, Matthew," entreated Mistress Dorothy tearfully.

She drew a small piece of blue cloth from the bosom of her dress: it was pinked and brodered, and had the image of the Holy Virgin painted on one side of it. Quickly she slipped it under her lover's jerkin.

"Take it," she whispered, "the scapulary of Our Lady will protect thee."

This momentous conclave was here interrupted by the approach of the small detachment of the town guard which had been sent hither to ensure order amongst the holiday-makers.

Matthew and his friends began ostentatiously to talk of the weather and other such trifling matters, until after the guard had passed, then once more they put their heads together.

But this time they bade the women go. What had to be discussed now was men's work and unfit for wench's ears.

CHAPTER IV

FRIENDS AND ENEMIES

In the meanwhile the two gallants were returning from their visit to the witch's tent.

As they came down the steps more than one voice among the passers-by inquired eagerly — "What fortune, sirs?"

"In truth she hath strange powers," was the somewhat guarded response.

The two men strolled up to a neighbouring wine-vendor and ordered some wine. They had thrown their cloaks aside and removed their masks, for the air was close. The rich, slashed doublets, thus fully displayed, the fine lace at throat and wrist, the silken hose and chased daggers, all betokened the high quality and wealth of the wearers.

Neither of them seemed much above thirty years of age; each had the air of a man in the prime of life, and in the full enjoyment of all the good things which the world can give.

But in their actual appearance they presented a marked contrast.

The one tall and broad-shouldered, florid of complexion, and somewhat reddish about the hair and small pointed beard; the other short, slender, and alert, with keen, restless eyes, and with sensuous lips for ever curled in a smile of thinly veiled sarcasm.

Though outwardly on most familiar terms together, there was distinctly apparent between the two men an air of reserve, and even of decided, if perhaps friendly, antagonism.

"Well, milor Everingham," said the Spaniard after a while, "what say you to our adventure?"

"I say first and foremost, my lord," replied Everingham with studied gallantry, "that my prophecy proved correct — the mysterious necromancer was no proof against Spanish wiles; she unveiled at a smile from Don Miguel, Marquis de Suarez, the envoy of His Most Catholic Majesty."

"Nay," rejoined Don Miguel, affecting not to notice the slight tone of sarcasm in his friend's pleasant voice, "I scarce caught a glimpse of the wench's face. The tent was so dark and her movements so swift."

There was a moment's silence. Lord Everingham seemed lost in meditation.

"You are thoughtful, milor," remarked Don Miguel. "Have the genii of the moon conquered your own usually lively spirits?"

"Nay, I was thinking of the curious resemblance," mused Everingham.

"A resemblance? — to whom?"

"As you say, the tent was dark and the wench's movements swift, yet I could see that, though coarsely clad and ill-kempt, that witch, whom they call Mirrab, is the very physical counterpart of the new Court beauty, the Lady Ursula Glynde."

"The fiancée of the Duke of Wessex!" exclaimed the Spaniard. "Impossible!"

"Nay, my lord," rejoined Everingham pointedly, "she scarce can be called His Grace's fiancée as yet. They were children in their cradles when *her* father plighted their troth."

The Spaniard made no immediate reply. With an affected, effeminate gesture he was gently stroking his long, black moustache. Everingham, on the other hand, was eyeing him keenly, with a certain look of defiance and challenge, and in a moment the antagonism between the two men appeared more marked than before.

"But gossip has it," said the Marquis at last, with assumed nonchalance, "that Lady Ursula's father — the Earl of Truro, was it not? — swore upon his honour and on his deathbed that she should wed the Duke of Wessex, whenever he claimed her hand, or live her life in a convent. Nay, I but repeat the rumour which has reached me," he added lightly; "put me right if I am in error, my lord. I am but a stranger, and have not yet had the honour of meeting His Grace."

"Bah!" said Everingham impatiently, "His Grace is in no humour to wed, nor do the Earl of Truro's deathbed vows bind *him* in any way."

He took up his bumper, and looking long and thoughtfully into it, he said with slow emphasis — "If the Duke of Wessex be inclined to marry, believe me, my lord Marquis, that it shall be none other than the Queen of England! Whom may God bless and protect," he added, reverently lifting his plumed hat with one hand, whilst with the other he held the bumper to his lips and tossed down the full measure of wine at one draught.

"Amen to that," responded Don Miguel with the same easy nonchalance.

He too drained his bumper to the dregs; then he said quietly —

"But that is where we differ, milor. His Eminence the Cardinal de Moreno and myself both hope that the Queen of England will wed our master King Philip of Spain."

Everingham seemed as if he would reply. But with a certain effort he checked the impatient words which had risen to his lips. Englishmen had only just begun to learn the tricks and wiles of Spanish diplomacy, the smiles which hide antagonisms, the suave words which disguise impulsive thoughts.

Lord Everingham had not wholly assimilated the lesson. He had frowned impatiently when the question of the marriage of his queen had been broached by the foreigner. It was a matter which roused the temper of every loyal Englishman just then; they would *not* see Mary Tudor wedded to a stranger. England was beginning to feel her own independence; her children would not see her under another yoke.

Mary, in spite of her Spanish mother, was English to the backbone. Tudor-like, she had proved her grit and her pluck when opposing factions tried to wrest her crown from her. She was Harry's daughter. Her loyal subjects were proud of her and proud of her descent, and many of them had sworn that none but an English husband should share her throne with her.

With the same sarcastic smile still lurking round his full lips the Spaniard had watched his friend closely the while. He knew full well what was going on behind that florid countenance, knew the antagonism which the proposed Spanish marriage was rousing just then in the hearts and minds of Englishmen of all classes.

But he certainly did not care to talk over such momentous questions at a country fair, with the eyes and mouths of hundreds of yokels gaping astonishment at him.

As far as he was concerned the half-amicable discussion was closed. He and his friend had agreed to differ. According to Spanish ideas, divergence in political opinions need not interfere with pleasant camaraderie.

With a genuine desire, therefore, to change the subject of conversation, Don Miguel rose from his seat and idly scanned the passing crowd.

"Carramba!" he ejaculated suddenly.

"What is it?"

"Our two masks," whispered the Spaniard. "What say you, milor, shall we resume our interrupted adventure and abandon the tiresome field of politics for the more easy paths of gallantry?"

And without waiting for his friend's reply, eager, impetuous, fond of intrigues and mysteries, the young man darted through the crowd in the direction where his keen eyes had spied a couple of hooded figures, thickly veiled, who were obviously trying to pass unperceived.

Everingham followed closely on the young Spaniard's footsteps. But the sun had already sunk low down in the west. Outlines and silhouettes had become indistinct and elusive. By the time the Marquis de Suarez and his English friend had elbowed their way through the throng the two mysterious figures had once more disappeared.

CHAPTER V

LADIES AND GALLANTS

Breathless, half laughing and half crying, very merry, yet wholly frightened, those same two hooded and masked figures had paused almost immediately beneath the platform of Mirrab's tent.

They had been running very fast, and, exhausted, were now clinging to one another, cowering in the deepest shadow of the rough wooden construction.

"Oh! Margaret sweet," whispered a feminine voice from behind the silken mask, "I vow I should have died with fright!"

"Think you we have escaped them?" murmured the other feebly.

She who had first spoken, taller than her friend and obviously the leader of this mad escapade, tiptoed cautiously forward and peered out into the open space.

"Sh – sh – sh!" she whispered, as she dragged her unwilling companion after her, "do you see them?.. right over there.. they are running fast.. Oh! ho! ho! ho!" she laughed suddenly with childish glee as she clapped her hands together; "but, Margaret dear!.. did we not fool them merrily?.. Oh! I could shriek for joy! Aye, run, run, run, my fine gallants!" she added, blowing an imaginary kiss to her distant pursuers, "an you go that way you'll ne'er o'ertake us, e'en though you raced the wind.. ha! ha! ha!.."

Her laugh sounded a little forced and hysterical, for she had had a terrible fright, and her companion was still clinging miserably, helplessly to her side.

"Nay, Ursula, how can you be so merry?" admonished Margaret in a voice almost choked with tears; "think if the Duchess of Lincoln were to hear of this adventure – or Her Majesty herself – oh!.."

But Ursula's gay, madcap mood was proof against Margaret's tears.

"Oh! oh! oh!" she ejaculated, mimicking her friend's tones of horror. "Oh!" she added with mock seriousness, "well, then, of course, there would be trouble, Margaret mine!.. sweet Margaret!.. such a lecture!.. and oh! oh! oh! such black looks from Her Majesty!.. we should e'en – think on it! – have to look demure for at least two days, until our sins be forgiven us!.."

She paused awhile, mischief apparent even beneath the half-transparent lace which hid her laughter-loving mouth. She drew her trembling companion closer to her, and, still laughing, she coaxed her gently.

"There, there, sweet," she murmured, "cheer up, I pray thee, cheer up... See, we have come to the end of our journey. We have baffled those persistent gallants, and this is the witch's tent. Margaret!" she added with an impatient tap of the foot, "art a goose to go on crying so? I vow I'd have come alone had I known thou'rt such a coward."

"Ursula!" said Margaret, somewhat emboldened by her friend's assurance, "could you guess who were those two gallants?"

"Nay," replied Ursula indifferently, "one of them, methinks, was the Marquis de Suarez, for I caught sight of his black silk hose, but what do we care about these nincompoops, Margaret? Come and see the witch – we have no time to lose."

Eagerly she turned towards the booth, and somewhat awed, anxious, yet not wholly daring, she gazed up in astonishment at the gaudy draperies, the tall flagstaff, the weird black flag with its strange device. Then with sudden resolution she planted her foot upon the bottom step.

"Wilt follow me, sweet?" she asked.

Even as she spoke Abra, in tall peaked cap and flowing mantle, emerged from within the tent. Margaret, who was screwing up her courage to follow her friend, gave a shriek of dismay.

"No! no! no! Ursula!" she said, clinging to the other girl, not daring to look up at the awesome figure of the lean magician. "I implore you, give up the thought."

"Give up the thought?" rejoined Ursula, boldly trying to smother her own superstitious fears, "when I've gone thus far?"

"I cannot think what you want with that horrid witch!" pleaded Margaret.

At sight of Abra's long white beard, his wizard's wand, and cloak covered with cabalistic signs, even Ursula's courage had begun to ebb. She had hastily retreated from the steps and followed Margaret once more within the protecting shelter of the shadows.

"I want to know my fortune, Margaret mine," she said in a voice which was not quite as firm as before, "and I hear that this witch can see into the future. 'Tis said that she has marvellous powers."

"Why should you want to know the future?" persisted timid, practical Margaret; "is not the present good enough for you?"

"His Grace of Wessex comes back to Court to-day," rejoined Ursula, "after an absence of many months."

"Well? – what of him?"

"What of him?.. Margaret, art stupid, or art not my friend?.. Is it not natural that I should wish to know whether I am to be Duchess of Wessex or abbess in a holy but uncomfortable convent?"

"Yes, 'tis natural enough," assented Margaret thoughtfully, "but – "

"His Grace has never seen me since I was so long," said Ursula with a short, impatient sigh, and stretching out a round arm decked with a sleeve of rich silk and fine lace. "I had a red face then, and pap was stuffed into my mouth to keep me quiet. You see, I could not have been madly alluring then."

"And you are beautiful now, Ursula. But of what avail is it? You cannot wed His Grace of Wessex, for he'll never ask you to be his wife. He'll marry the Queen. All England wishes it."

"But I wish him to marry me," quoth Ursula with a resolute tap of her high-heeled shoe against the ground. "Yes, me! and I want that witch yonder to ask the stars if he will fall in love with me when he sees me, or if he will yield to those who want to make of him a tool for their political ambition, and marry an ugly, ill-tempered old woman who happens to be Queen of England."

"Ursula!"

Margaret's horror, amazement, and awe had rendered her almost speechless. Ursula's utterance was nearly sacrilegious, in these days when kings and queens ruled by right divine.

But the young girl continued, quite unabashed by her friend's rebuke.

"Well," she said imperturbably, "you can't deny that the Queen is old!.. and ugly!.. and ill-tempered!.."

Margaret, however, was prepared to deny these monstrous statements with the last breath left in her delicate body. The poor little soul was frightened out of her wits.

Suppose some one had overheard! – and repeated the tale that two of the Queen's ladies-in-waiting had called Her Majesty old! – and ugly! – and ill-tempered! —

Nay, Ursula's madcap freaks were past bearing! and would lead her into serious trouble one of these days.

"Margaret," whispered the delinquent, who still seemed quite unaware of the enormity of her offence, "hast thou ever seen His Grace of Wessex?"

"No," replied Margaret curtly, for she was still very wrathful, and vaguely felt that, at this stage, all references to the Duke were somehow treasonable.

"Nor I since I was a baby," sighed Ursula; "but see here.."

From beneath the folds of her cloak she drew a chain and locket, and holding the latter before Margaret's unwilling eyes, she said ecstatically —

"That's his picture. Isn't he handsome?"

"You've fallen in love with his picture!"

"Madly!"

"Madly indeed!" retorted Margaret.

Ursula once more hid the locket inside her robe. She had regained all her courage. Once more dragging her weaker companion by the wrist she turned towards the witch's booth.

Abra, the magician, tired out by his day's exertions, had settled himself down on a tattered piece of rug outside the tent; there he had fallen peacefully asleep, his venerable head thrown back, his lean shanks hanging over the edge of the platform and snoring the snore of the just. Thus he had failed to spy the two hooded, dainty figures, who had all along kept within the shadows.

Suddenly through his pleasant slumbers he heard an eagerly whispered —

"Hey! friend!"

Whilst the toe of his shoe was violently tagged at from below.

"Friend, wake!"

"They won't listen!" added an impatient, half-tearful voice.

But already Abra was on his feet. Giving his humble henchman a violent kick to wake him up, he began to mutter mechanically, even before he was fully conscious —

"What ho, my masters! consult the world-famous necromancer —"

Bang! bang! bang! on the big drum came automatically from his henchman, who was only half awake.

"No! no! no!" entreated Ursula, "I prithee not so much noise! We wish to consult the soothsayer.. we've brought some money.. three gold pieces.. is that enough?.. But in the name of Our Lady I beg of thee not to make so much noise."

Timidly she held up a silken purse towards the astonished wizard. Three gold pieces! — why, 'twas a fortune, the like of which the worthy Abra had never beheld in one sum in his life.

To ask him not to make a noise was to demand the impossible. With one hand he pushed his henchman vigorously to one side. The latter dropped his cymbals, which rattled off the platform with an ear-splitting crash.

All the while Abra in stentorian tones, and holding back the folds of the tent, was shouting at the top of his voice —

"This way, ladies! for the great soothsayer Mirrab, the sale of love-philters and charms, and of the true elixir of life."

"The die is cast, Margaret mine," said Ursula, trying vainly to steady her voice, which was trembling, and her knees which were shaking beneath her. "Art coming? — Oh! I — I — feel a little nervous," she admitted in spite of herself, "and you — oh! how your hand trembles.."

She was frankly terrified now. The noise was so awful, and though she did not dare look to the right or left of her she was conscious that she and her friend were no longer alone on the open place. She could hear the murmur of voices, the sound of idle folk gathering in every direction.

Her instinct suggested immediate flight, and the abandonment of this mad adventure while there was yet time, but her pride urged her to proceed. She gripped Margaret's wrist with a resolute hand and made a quick rush for the steps.

Alas! she was just two seconds too late. The next instant she felt her waist seized firmly from behind, whilst a merry voice shouted —

"Cornered at last!"

Wrenching herself free with a sudden twist of her firm young shoulders, Ursula contrived to liberate herself momentarily. She was dimly conscious of having caught sight of Margaret in the like plight as herself.

"Not so fast, fair one," whispered an insinuating voice close to her, "a word in thy pretty ear."

Oh! the shame of this vulgar adventure! Pursued like some kitchen wench out on a spree, by a gallant, eager for an idle kiss.

She felt her cheeks tingle underneath her mask; saw and guessed the short laugh, the shrug of the shoulders of the idlers round, far too accustomed to these spectacles to take more than passing note of it.

Once more the firm grip had seized her waist. This time she felt herself powerless to struggle.

"Nay, in the name of heaven, sir," she entreated tearfully, "I pray you let me go."

"Not until I have caught a nearer sight of those bright eyes, that shine at me through that cruel mask."

The soft guttural tones revealed the identity of the speaker to Ursula. She knew Don Miguel well; knew his wild, impudent spirit, his love of idle flirtations which had already made him the terror of the prim Queen's Court. She knew that she would not be allowed to escape before this ridiculous episode had been brought to its usual conclusion.

Oh! how she longed for the Duchess of Lincoln's severe guardianship at this moment! How bitterly she repented the folly which had prompted her to drag Margaret along into this wild adventure.

Poor Margaret! she, too, was doing her best to evade the unwelcome attentions of her gallant! and that magician! and those louts! all grinning like so many apes at the spectacle.

It was maddening!

And she was helpless!

The next moment the young Spaniard's indiscreet hands had snatched the protecting mask from her face, and the daintiest and most perfect picture Nature had ever fashioned stood revealed, blushing with shame and vexation, before his delighted, slightly sarcastic gaze.

"Ah! luck favours me indeed!" he murmured with avowed admiration, "the newly-risen star – nay! the brightest sun in the firmament of beauty! the Lady Ursula Glynde!"

CHAPTER VI

THE LADY URSULA

She was only nineteen then. Not very tall, yet perfectly proportioned, and with that small, oval face of hers which delighted yet puzzled all the artists of the epoch.

The dark hood of her cloak had fallen back at the impertinent gesture of the young Spaniard; her fair hair, slightly touched with warm gold, escaped in a few unruly curls from beneath the stiff coif of brocade which encircled her pretty head.

The neck was long; the shoulders, rich, young and firm, gleamed like ivory beneath the primly folded kerchief of lace of a dead, bluish white, a striking note of harmonious contrast.

Have not all the rhymesters of the period sung the praises of her eyes? What shall the poor chronicler add to these poetical effusions, save that Ursula's eyes were as changeable in colour as were her moods, her spirits, the expression of her face, and the inflexions of her voice.

And then there was the proud little toss of the head, that contemptuous curl of the lip which rendered her more desirable than any of her more yielding companions.

Indeed, Don Miguel felt in luck. His arm was still round her waist. He felt the young figure stiffen beneath his admiring glances.

The fair one was half mad with rage, and quite adorable in her wrath.

"My lord Marquis, this is an outrage!" she said at last, "and here in England – "

"Nay, fair one," rejoined the Spaniard with a slight accent of irony, "even in England, when two ladies, masked and alone, are held prisoners at nightfall, and in a public place, by their ardent adorers, they must needs pay ransom for their release. What say you, my lord?" he added, turning gaily to where his friend held pretty Margaret a not too unwilling prisoner.

"'Tis but justice," assented Lord Everingham, "and yours the first prize, Marquis. Fair one," he said, looking down into Margaret's shyly terrified eyes, "wilt pay toll to me the while?"

"Gentlemen!" proudly protested Lady Ursula, "an there's any honour in you – "

"Nay! honour lies in snatching a kiss from those sweet lips," rejoined Don Miguel with a graceful flourish of his plumed hat.

This act of gallantry, however, almost cost him the price of his victory. Ursula Glynde, born and bred in the country, was the daughter of a sturdy Cornish nobleman. Accustomed to ride untamed foals, to have bouts at the broadsword or the poniard with the best man in the county, she would not yield a kiss or own herself vanquished quite as readily as the Spaniard seemed to expect.

With a vigorous jerk of the body she had once more freed herself from the Marquis's grasp, and running up to Margaret, she snatched her by the hand and dragged her away from Lord Everingham, readjusting her hood and mask as she flew towards the booth, vaguely hoping for shelter behind the folds of the tent.

But once more fate interposed relentlessly betwixt her and her attempts at escape. Two gallants, seeing the episode, eager to have a hand in the adventure, friends no doubt too of Don Miguel and Everingham, laughingly barred the way to the steps, just as the two girls had contrived to reach them. With a cry of disappointment Ursula, still dragging Margaret after her, tried to double back. But it was too late. Don Miguel and Lord Everingham were waiting for them on the other side. They were two to one now, and all chances of escape had hopelessly vanished.

Never had Ursula Glynde felt so mortified in her life.

"Many thanks, gentlemen, for this timely interference," came in mocking accents from that odious Spaniard. "The ransom, sweet one," he added, as the chase 'twixt gallants and maids became more general, and the girls at last felt themselves quite helpless and surrounded.

Ursula's pride alone prevented her from bursting into tears.

"By my faith! here is strange sport!" said a pleasant, slightly mocking voice suddenly. "What say you, Harry Plantagenet? A lively sight.. what?.. four gallants frightening two ladies!"

Instinctively every one had turned in the direction whence the voice had come. A man was standing some dozen yards away with mantle tightly drawn round him, his tall figure stooping to pat and fondle a powerful-looking boarhound, which clung closely to his side.

He had spoken very quietly, apparently to the dog, whose great ears he was gently stroking.

Without taking any further heed of the somewhat discomfited gentlemen, he came forward towards the little group.

"Ladies, your way stands clear," he said, with that same pleasant irony still apparent in his voice, and without casting more than a cursory glance at the close hoods and dark masks, which was all that he could see of the ladies, whom he had so incontinently saved from an unpleasant position.

"Sir," murmured Ursula, under her breath and without attempting to move, for she felt as if her knees would give way under her.

"Nay, Madam," rejoined the newcomer lightly, "if my interference has angered you, I pray you forgive me and I'll withdraw, as these gentlemen here obviously desire me to do. But an you really wish to escape, my friend here will assure you that you can do so unmolested... Eh, Harry? what say you?" he added, once more turning his attention to the dog.

The boarhound, as if conscious of this appeal to his chivalry, turned a knowing eye on the two girls.

The four men had been taken so absolutely unawares that during the few seconds while this brief colloquy took place they had scarcely realised that an interfering and unknown stranger was trying to hamper them in their amusements.

They had remained quite speechless, more astonished at the newcomer's impertinence than wrathful at the interruption; and when the next instant Ursula and Margaret suddenly fled with unaffected precipitancy, no one attempted to stop them.

Harry Plantagenet's intelligent eyes followed the retreating figures until they were out of sight. Then he yawned with obtrusive incivility, and plainly showed his master that the present company no longer interested him.

"Well, Harry, old man, shall we go?" said the stranger, calmly turning on his heel.

But at this final piece of cool insolence Don Miguel de Suarez at last recovered from his astonishment. This tame ending to an unwarrantable intrusion was certainly not to his liking, and he, for one, was unaccustomed to see his whims or caprices thwarted.

In these days tempers ran high, hot blood was allowed free rein, and at a word or a smile out of place, swords and poniards were soon out of their sheaths and friendships of yesterday changed to deadly antagonism in the space of a few minutes.

"Carramba!" swore the young Spaniard, "this passes belief. What say you, gentlemen?"

And, drawing his long, tapering sword, he barred the way threateningly to the stranger.

The silence, thus broken, seemed to restore at once to the other three gallants the full measure of their wrath. One and all following Don Miguel's example, had put their hands to their sword-hilts.

"Aye! unmask, stranger," said Lord Everingham peremptorily.

"Unmask! unmask!" came in threatening accents from all.

"Unmask, or."

"Or by our Lady!" rejoined the stranger lightly, "you'll all run your blades into my silken doublet and thus end pleasantly a chivalrous escapade. Eh?"

One could divine the pleasant, ironical smile lurking behind the thick curtain of the mask. The Spaniard's blood was boiling with vexation. Harry Plantagenet gave an impatient whine.

"Your name, stranger, first," commanded Don Miguel haughtily, "then your sword if you are not a coward; after that I and these gentlemen will deal with your impudence if you have any left."

There was a moment's silence; the stranger whistled to his dog.

"My sword is at your command," he said; "mine impudence you shall deal with as you list... My name is Wessex!" he added with a sudden hauteur which seemed to tower above Don Miguel as the gigantic oak of the glen towers above the bustling willow beneath.

And he removed the mask from his face.

CHAPTER VII

HIS GRACE OF WESSEX

There are several portraits extant of Robert d'Esclade, fifth Duke of Wessex, notably the one by Antonio Moro in the Pitti Gallery at Florence.

But in the somewhat stiff portraiture of that epoch it is perhaps a little difficult to trace the real image, the inner individuality of one of the most interesting personalities at the Court of Mary Tudor.

There is, however, a miniature of him, attributed to Holbein, and certainly drawn by the hand of a great master, which renders with greater truth and loving accuracy the peculiar charm made up of half-indolent nonchalance, gracious condescension, and haughty reserve which characterized the Duke of Wessex.

So justly styled His Grace!

The reserve was so little apparent. The hauteur only came to the surface in response to unwelcome familiarity. But the debonair indolence was always there, the lazy droop of the lids, the nonchalant shrug of the shoulders, when grave matters were discussed, and also that obvious fastidiousness – a love of everything that was beautiful, from a fine horse, down to a piece of delicate lace – which annoyed the more sedate-minded courtiers of the Queen.

And with it all that wonderful virility and vigour, that joy of life and delight in gaiety and laughter which lent to the grave face at times a spark of almost boyish exuberance; that mad, merry, proud insouciance, which throughout his life made him meet every danger – aye! every sorrow and disgrace – with the same bright smile on his lips.

Scheyfne, in his letters to the emperor, Charles V, says of the Duke of Wessex that he was insufferably conceited – "il est tres orgueilleux de sa beauté personelle, laquelle certes est plus que médiocre."

Noailles, too, speaks of him as "moult fatueux et vaniteux de sa personne."

But it was hardly likely that these foreign delegates, each bent upon their own schemes, would look with favour upon His Grace. His only merit in their eyes was that same characteristic indolence of his, which caused a man of his great wealth and boundless influence to abstain from politics.

Certes no one could accuse him of intriguing for his own political advancement. Mary Tudor's own avowed penchant for him was so well known, that he had but to say the word and the crown of England would be his, to share with the Queen.

Yet since the death of Edward VI he had not been seen at Court. Small wonder, therefore, that at sight of the Duke all four men seemed amazed.

"His Grace of Wessex!" they ejaculated in one breath.

But already Lord Everingham had put up his sword and gone to Wessex with hands outstretched.

"Wessex!" he said with unmistakable delight. "By Our Lady, this is a joyful surprise!"

The other two Englishmen also shook the Duke warmly by the hand.

"I did not know you were in England, my lord," said the one.

"Right glad are we to welcome you back," added the other.

"Well, Harry, my friend," quoth the Duke gaily, "methinks you and I are not to be spiked after all."

Harry Plantagenet, however, was looking doubtfully at the young Spaniard, who had remained somewhat in the background, regarding the first effusions of his friends with a certain ill-concealed impatience. With almost human intelligence the dog seemed to understand that here was a person who was inimical to his master, and in his faithful eyes there came that unmistakable furtive look and blink, with which dogs invariably show their mistrust and dislike.

But Don Miguel de Suarez was above all a diplomatist. Capricious and fond of adventure, not over-scrupulous as to the choice of his pleasures, yet he never allowed his dearest whim to interfere with political necessities.

A few seconds' quick reflection soon made it dear to him that a quarrel with the Duke of Wessex would, at this juncture, greatly endanger his own popularity at the English Court, and thereby minimize his chances of carrying through the negotiations entrusted to him by King Philip of Spain.

Under the leadership of His Eminence the Cardinal de Moreno he certainly hoped to bring about the marriage of Philip with the Queen of England.

He knew perfectly well that he and his eminent colleague were opposed in this design by the entire ultra-English faction here, and also that this faction was composed of practically the whole of the nobility and chivalry of the realm.

The Duke of Wessex was the pride and hope of this party, for Courtenay, weak and effeminate, had lost all his partisans. What more natural than that the most distinguished, most brilliant of Queen Mary's subjects should share her throne with her?

All this and more passed swiftly through Don Miguel's active brain. Therefore, as soon as there was a lull in the joyful welcome accorded to the Duke by his friends, he too stepped forward, having with vigorous self-will curbed his unruly temper and forced his full, sensuous lips to a smile. He had realized the expediency of, at any rate, outward amiability.

"A great name, my lord," he said, bowing with grave ceremony to Wessex, "and one familiar to me already, though I have not yet been honoured by seeing you at Court."

The Duke eyed him for the space of two brief seconds, whilst just the faintest touch of superciliousness seemed to be lurking somewhere at the back of his neck. But he returned the Spaniard's bow with equal ceremony. Then he placed his hand on the head of his dog.

"Nay, sir," he said, "my friend here bears a prouder name than mine. Harry Plantagenet, make your bow to the envoy of His Most Catholic Majesty. I call him Plantagenet, sir, after our King Harry V, who drove back the French at Agincourt. Nay, your pardon; this scarce interests you. You were not born then, and Spain was not yet a kingdom."

He spoke lightly, and none but Everingham's devoted ears caught the slight tone of impertinence which underlay the bland, seemingly empty speech.

Don Miguel himself was determined to keep urbane.

"A beautiful creature, indeed," he said suavely; "but you, milor Duke, do you return to Hampton Court with us this night?"

"Oh!" replied Wessex, "among so many brilliant diplomatists from Spain there's scarce room for a mere idler like myself."

"Yet we diplomatists are hoping to pit our poor wits against Your Grace's," added Don Miguel pointedly.

"Against those of my friends perhaps, my lord," rejoined the Duke drily. "Mine own are incorrigibly idle."

Don Miguel, as was his wont, did not pursue the subject any further. He was trying to read the refined, distinctly haughty countenance, which was smiling down at him so pleasantly just now, and taking mental stock of this antagonist, whom rumour had described to him and to his chief as the only serious obstacle to the proposed Spanish alliance.

He saw before him a man in the full pride of youth and manhood, tall and well knit, and wearing with easy grace the elaborate slashes and puffs, trunks and silk hose, which present fashion had decreed.

The Spaniard's keen and critical eye took in every detail of this interesting personality: the short, light brown hair worn close to the head, the fair moustache and delicately refined hands, the richness of the doublet, the priceless value of the lace at throat and wrist.

"A fop and an idler!" he murmured mentally.

Then he thought of the Queen of England. No longer young, with but little taste in ornament and dress, and certes quite unversed in all those wiles, which might have drawn this brilliant butterfly into her net.

The Spaniard longed to see these two together. The presence of this formidable adversary gave additional zest to the game he was playing on the political chess-board.

An unwilling courtier! A love-sick Queen! Carramba! it was interesting.

"When do you return to the Palace, my lord?" Everingham was asking of the Duke.

"To-night," replied the latter, "by our gracious Liege Lady's own command."

"To-night then?"

"Without fail. Harry Plantagenet and I will present our humble respects to Her Majesty."

"Tis au revoir then, Your Grace," quoth Don Miguel. "We meet again to-night."

"At your service, my lord Marquis."

Still smiling amicably the Spaniard took his leave, soon followed by two of his companions. Lord Everingham too was about to depart, but he felt Wessex' detaining hand on his arm.

"That unpleasant-looking Spaniard?." queried the Duke.

"Don Miguel, Marquis de Suarez," replied Everingham, "envoy of His Majesty, the King of Spain."

"Aye, I knew all that. I was merely reflecting that if he happen to be a specimen of our Liege Lady's Court, meseems I were a fool to go back to it."

"Come back to it with me now," urged his friend earnestly.

"Not till to-night. Do not grudge me these few last hours of freedom. By Our Lady! I meant to consult the famous witch, like a sober burgher out on a holiday. But in the name of all the saints in the calendar let us forget there are such things as Spaniards at the English Court just now."

He laughed, a half weary, wholly pleasant laugh, as, followed by his dog, he led his friend in the opposite direction to that in which Don Miguel had rapidly walked away.

CHAPTER VIII

SILKEN BONDS

Wessex and Everingham had readjusted their masks and wrapped their cloaks around them, ere they once more mingled with the crowd which still thronged around the gaily decked booths.

The evening now was rapidly drawing in. Hampton Court, in the fast-gathering haze beyond, looked grey and ghostlike, with brightly illumined windows beginning to gleam here and there.

With an impatient frown, Wessex deliberately turned his back on the gorgeous pile: it represented boredom to him, politics and dullness, and he loved gaiety, sunshine, and laughter, these merry-makers here, the pretty country wenches with their bare arms and neat ankles showing beneath their brightly coloured robes.

Everingham was silent as he followed his friend through the crowd. But Wessex' laugh was always infectious, and he seemed in a merry mood to-night. Harry Plantagenet alone seemed morose; he disapproved of all these country louts, who were over free with their caresses. He kept close to his master's heel, and only gave an occasional growl, when some impudent 'prentice dared to come too nigh.

"Well, Harry, old friend," said the Duke after a while, "shall we go and consult the witch, or wait until the stars are out? Friend Everingham here is none too good company to-night, eh? In thine ear, proud Plantagenet, he hath designs on our freedom. But the soothsayer shall cast our horoscope, and look into our future, see if you are to become chief lapdog to the Queen of England, or if we are both of us to fall in bondage to the mistress plighted to us by an uncomfortable old gentleman, who had not consulted us in the matter. 'Sdeath man," he added, suddenly looking straight into Everingham's serious face, "why do you look so grave? Tell me, pending that witch's starlit lies, what's your best news?"

"By my faith!" responded Everingham simply, "the best news is Your Grace's return. 'Twas an ill wind that wafted you away from Court."

"Aye! 'twas the wind of infinite boredom wafted my Grace away," replied the Duke with a smile. "Confess, friend, that the Court cannot be alluring with the Queen telling her beads, the foreign ambassadors ruling England, the Privy Council at loggerheads, the people grumbling, and the ladies yawning. Brrr!"

He gave a mock shiver, and seemed not to notice the quick look of reproach cast at him by his friend.

"And out of sheer boredom," quoth Everingham with a sigh of deep disappointment, "you piqued the Queen of England."

Wessex did not reply at once. At Everingham's tone of rebuke a slight frown had contracted his forehead, and that certain look of hauteur, never wholly absent from his face, at once became more apparent.

There was more than mere camaraderie between these two men: unity of thought, similarity of tastes and education, a great and overwhelming love for their own country, together with mutual understanding and appreciation, had long ago knit the ties of friendship closely between them. It was generally admitted by every one that Lord Everingham might venture on a ground of familiarity with His Grace which no one else quite dared to tread.

This time too, after that instant's hesitation, the reserve which every now and then seemed entirely to detach the Duke of Wessex from his surroundings, quickly disappeared again. The pleasant smile returned to the proud lips, he shrugged his shoulders and said simply —

"Is the Queen of England piqued?"

"Can you ask?" rejoined the other with increased vehemence.

Then he checked himself abruptly, feeling no doubt how useless it was to discuss such matters seriously just now.

"The only woman," he added, falling in once more with his friend's lighter mood, "the only woman whose blandishments His Grace of Wessex has ever been known to resist."

"And that with difficulty," concluded the Duke gaily. "But you see, friend," he added with mock gravity, "with a Tudor you never can tell; you might lose your heart one day and your head the next."

"Mary Tudor loves you too well," protested Lord Everingham.

"She is the daughter of King Harry VIII, remember, and would threaten me with the block or the rack at every indiscretion."

He paused, then added quaintly —

"And I would commit so many."

"A woman who loves always forgives," urged his friend.

"A woman, my good Everingham, will forgive a grave infidelity — perhaps! but not a number of little indiscretions. Mine," he added with a light sigh, "would be the little indiscretions."

"And while you fled from Court the Queen of England has almost promised to wed the Spanish king," said Everingham bitterly.

He watched his friend keenly as he spoke and paused a moment before he added pointedly —

"'Twill be a proud day for the peers of England when they bow the knee to their Liege Lord, a foreign king."

Wessex shrugged his broad shoulders and turned to where a pretty wench, dispensing ale to a scarlet-cloaked burgher, formed a picture pleasing to his artistic eye.

Everingham, somewhat proud of his own diplomatic skill, had noted, however, a certain stiffening of His Grace's figure at the vision which had been conjured before him.

That of a Wessex bending the knee before a Spaniard.

"You were away," continued Everingham, eager to goad his friend into speech, "and my Lord Cardinal and Don Miguel know how to blow upon the flames of Mary's jealousy. Your influence can still save England, my lord," he added with great earnestness, "let not your enemies say that fear of a woman keeps you from exerting it."

"H'm! do they say that?" mused Wessex quaintly, whilst a smile, which almost might be called boyish, altered the whole expression of his serious face. "By my faith! but they are right. One's enemies usually are."

He drew his friend away from the immediate vicinity of a jabbering crowd, into a dark corner formed by one of the booths. Everingham, thinking that at last he had led Wessex into a graver train of thought, failed to notice the humorous twinkle of the eyes which had so palpably struggled to the surface.

"It is the fear of a woman has kept me away from Court," he whispered solemnly, "but that woman is not the Queen of England."

"Who is it then?"

"In your ear, friend.. 'tis the Lady Ursula Glynde."

Everingham could scarce suppress a movement of intense satisfaction. Lady Ursula! beautiful, exquisite Lady Ursula was the one stumbling-block on which the schemes of his faction might become hopelessly shattered.

Wessex was nominally plighted to the lady. True, 'twas an engagement undertaken by the lady's own father, without the consent of the parties chiefly concerned. But in Tudor England there was a curious adherence to such solemnly plighted troths, which might have proved a bar to the Duke's sense of absolute freedom.

If, however, he looked upon this unnatural and monstrous pledge with the lightness which it fully deserved, if he considered himself at liberty to break the imaginary bonds which held him to Lady Ursula, then the work of his partisans would become comparatively easy.

They had always hoped and fully intended to overcome His Grace's scruples in the matter, and fondly thought that they would succeed. But since the Duke himself looked indifferently upon this so-called troth, why, Everingham himself was the first to feel the keenest satisfaction at the thought.

"You dislike the lady then?" he asked with unfeigned delight.

"I have never seen her," retorted Wessex placidly. "At any rate, not since she was in her cradle. I certainly didn't like her then."

"She is very beautiful," remarked Everingham, with a somewhat shamefaced recollection of his previous adventure, "but – "

"She might be a veritable angel, yet she would frighten me."

A mock shudder passed through his tall, athletic frame, and taking his friend's arm in his, he whispered confidentially, "Think of it, my lord! A woman whom duty *compels* one to love – Brrr! – Her own father plighted our troth; I am left comparatively free, yet if I do not wed Lady Ursula, she is doomed to end her days in a convent... A matter of honour – what?.. Yet I – I, who could love any woman," he added emphatically, "be she queen or peasant – that is – h'm! – if I were really put to it – find the very thought of my promised bride abhorrent. She is the one woman in all the world whom I could never love – never!.. I know it! So I ran away from Court, not because I feared one woman loved me too much, but because I knew I should love one woman too little."

He had spoken so light-heartedly, so gaily, that in spite of the grave issues at stake Everingham could not help but laugh.

"Nay! perhaps you exaggerate the danger," he said. "The Lady Ursula might prefer the convent to being a duchess. She has never seen Your Grace, she is rich and high-born, she may be pious – "

"Or perverse," responded Wessex. "I've never met a woman yet who didn't want – badly – the thing she mightn't get."

"Is England then a woman," queried Everingham with renewed earnestness, "since she wants Wessex?"

But the Duke was not prepared to follow his friend to-night into sentimental, ultra-patriotic bypaths. He was not altogether inclined to sacrifice his liberty for the sake of ousting the Spanish king from his proposed English throne.

Nevertheless he rejoined more gravely than was his wont.

"Does England really want me?" he said with gentle irony. "Nay!" he added, restraining with one hand Everingham's exuberant protests, "I know! I know! you all think so, and that I am an unhallowed idler, letting my country drift into the arms of the foreigner. Do not deny it, friend... Perhaps I am... Nay! we'll say, indeed I am... There! there! calm your fears. Have I not told you that Her Majesty hath commanded my presence at Court? We'll set our poor wits to oust Spanish diplomacy, and I must trust my luckiest star to inspire in the Lady Ursula a wholesome desire for the convent; for I tell thee, friend, that if she holds me to my silken bonds, I will at once repair to the outermost corner of the earth and thence drop into vacancy, or take flight to the blue dome of heaven above."

"God protect Your Grace," rejoined Everingham with grave solemnity. "Ah! I fear no Spanish influence now," he added enthusiastically. "You'll save England, my lord, and the gratitude of the nation will be at your feet."

Wessex smiled, shrugged his shoulders, and without further allusion to more serious subjects the two men mingled once more among the crowd.

CHAPTER IX

THE VEILED WITCH

Outside the witch's tent all was silent and deserted. Darkness had gradually crept in, and with it – as far as the rest of the Fair was concerned – additional noise and exuberant gaiety.

Huge torches of gum and resin flickered at the entrance of every booth, throwing quaint red lights, and deep, mysterious shadows all round, distorting the faces of the gaping multitude, and of the criers, until they looked like fantastic figures, wizards all from some neighbouring Brocken.

Whether the world-famous necromancer, Mirrab, and her attendant genii were lacking in business or no, no one could say, for there was no torch outside their tent, and Abra had ceased to lure the passer-by. The open place in front of the platform was dark and still.

Suddenly from out the shadows something seemed to move forward, whilst a mysterious "Hist! hist!" came echoing from more than one direction.

Gradually the sound became more distinct, dark figures emerged from every side, and presently a compact group of moving, whispering people congregated some few yards away from the booth. Then a voice, still low and muffled, but firm and emphatic, detached itself from the ghostlike murmur around.

"My masters, I call upon you to witness!.. The Scriptures say, 'Let no witch live.'.. Shall we disobey the Scriptures and allow that witch to live?.. She is possessed, and the devil dwells in that booth."

Groans and threatening curses greeted this peroration. The speaker raised his voice somewhat.

"Will you allow Satan to remain amongst you?"

"No! no! no!" came in excited accents from the little crowd.

"And I say death to the witch!" added the leading voice solemnly.

"Death to the witch!" came in weird echoes from all around.

Then there was silence. The dark heads bent closer together.

"What wilt thou do, Matthew?" whispered one voice with awed timidity.

"Let her burn, I say," replied the learned village oracle; "'tis the only way of getting rid of Satan."

It had been a hot day. The heads of this pack of country folk had been overheated with sack and spiced ale; an unreasoning, maniacal terror, with superstition for its basis, had completed the work of completely addling their loutish brains. All day there had been talk of this veiled witch, these strange spirits and weird monsters which she was reputed to conjure up at will. Thoughts of poisoned wells, of sweating sickness, of hell-fire raged through these poor misguided fellows' minds.

What did they know of charlatanism or trickery? To them it was all real, living, awesome, terrible. The devil was a person with glowing eyes, two horns, and a forked tail, who caused innocent people to fall flat on their backs and foam at the mouth.

Every malady then unknown to science was ascribed to hellish agency. And here, within a few yards, was an unearthly creature who actually consorted with the creator of all evil, who wilfully brought him up from his burning abode below the earth, and let him loose upon this peaceful village and its God-fearing inhabitants.

"Nay! burn her! burn her!" they shouted, brandishing their sticks, emboldened through their very cowardice into deeds they would otherwise never have contemplated without a shudder.

And they shouted in order to keep up their exaltation and their excitement; the devil is known to favour whisperings.

"After me, my masters," continued Matthew, who was still the leader of this insane band of mischievous fools, "after me. Remember there's salvation for our sins if we burn the witch."

With another wild shout the little crowd made a rush for the platform of the booth, just as Abra and his henchman, attracted by the strangeness of the noise, came out of the tent to see what might be amiss.

Before they had time to utter a sound of protest the two men were seized by the crowd and dragged down the steps with violence. The people had no time to trouble about a lout such as he. They wanted the witch herself, now, at once, while their blood was up and boiling; and the guard might come round at any moment and frustrate them in their will.

"Out of the way, lout! out of the way! or thou'lt burn alongside of thy damned witch!"

Abra had fallen on his knees, understanding only too well the danger which was threatening him. He had known all along what terrible risks he was taking. 'Twas not well in these days to tamper with the supernatural. But he had trusted to the good temper of holiday-makers, whilst the certain patronage of rich burghers and Court gallants had proved an overwhelming temptation to his greed of gain. For the wench he cared but little. He had picked her out of the gutter one day, a starving little slut, and had used her as a tool – a willing one enough – for his own pecuniary ends.

Even now, with a cursing throng of maniacs round him, he only thought of his own safety. Mean, abject, and cowardly, he fell upon his knees.

"Merciful heavens, my masters," he pleaded.

But the crowd was not in a humour to listen. The men kicked him on one side, and he fell up against his miserable companion, who was too terror-stricken to move.

Then there was another rush up to the platform. Without thought or pause, for these would have been fatal to the resolute purpose in view, and might give the devil time to look after his own.

From within the tent there came now a frantic shriek of terror. The next moment, the foremost among the crowd had pushed aside the gaudy draperies, and that one shriek was answered by a dozen awesome, horrified curses.

There was the witch at last. A poor trembling girl, scarce out of her teens, with beautiful, delicate features, and an abundance of golden hair falling round her shoulders; her mysterious veil – a bit of showy tinsel – lying in a heap on the floor. Nothing supernatural or devilish about her, surely. Quaint, perhaps, because of that singular beauty of face and skin which seemed so ill-assorted with the sordidness of her surroundings. One of Nature's curious freaks, this kitchen wench with a head which would have graced a duchess, her interesting personality merely the prey of a common charlatan, who used her for vulgar, senseless trickery.

For the moment her beauty was distorted through the dawning of an awful terror. To a sane man she would only have seemed a wretched, miserable, frightened woman. But not so to the ale-sodden, overheated minds of these excited creatures, blinded by an almost maniacal fear.

To them she looked supernaturally tall, supernaturally weird, with great glowing eyes and tongues of flame illumining her person.

"The witch!" they shouted, "the witch! the witch!"

"What do you want with me?" murmured the poor girl.

Egged on by their passions they smothered their terror. They seized her violently by the wrists and dragged her out of her lair and on to the platform, where the rest of the crowd were pressing.

A shout of exultation, of hellish triumph, greeted the appearance of the wretched woman. Not a spark of pity was aroused by her helplessness, her obvious, abject terror.

"The witch! the witch! death to the witch!"

They seemed to be fanning their own passions, adding fuel to the flames of their insensate wrath.

There was the source of all the evil which might have befallen the peaceful valley of the Thames! the creature with the evil eye, the dispenser of misery and death!

They had forgotten the guard now. Their lawlessness knew no bounds. But for the incessant din of the merry-makers at the Fair, the banging of the drums, and the shouts of the criers, their

own yells of execration, their violent curses, and the shrieks of the captive girl could not have failed to attract attention.

But every one was busy laughing and enjoying the last hours of this happy day. No one came to interfere in this devilish work which was about to be consummated.

And every word the poor woman uttered but brought further vituperation upon her.

She shouted, "Help!"

"Hark, my masters," sneered Matthew loftily, "she calls to Satan for help."

"What will you do with me?" she pleaded. "I've done you no wrong."

"Thou hast brought the devil in our midst."

"No! no!"

"I saw thee riding on a broomstick – going to thy Sabbath revels."

"'Tis false!"

"Tie her to the pole – quick!"

The so-called witch, the friend of Satan and of all the powers of darkness, fell upon her knees in an agony of the wildest despair. Realizing her position, the terrible doom which was awaiting her, her whole figure seemed to writhe with the agony of her horror. She dragged herself to Matthew's knees – he seemed to be leading the others – she wrenched her arms free from those who held her and threw them round him. She forced her voice to gentleness and pleading, tried to appeal to what was a stone wall of unconquerable prejudice.

"Sirs, kind sirs," she entreated, "you would not harm a poor girl who had done you no wrong?.. you won't harm me – you won't... Oh, God!" she shrieked in her frenzy, "you wouldn't – you wouldn't – Holy Virgin, protect me – "

A rough hand was placed over her mouth and her last yells were smothered as she was ruthlessly dragged away.

Then with two or three leather belts she was securely tied to the flagstaff, whilst a thick woollen scarf was wound round her face and neck, leaving only the eyes free to roam wildly on the awful scene around.

Awful indeed!

Man turned to savage beast in the frenzy of his own fear.

Swift and silent, like so many rodents in the night, the men began collecting bits of wood, broke up their sticks into small pieces, tore branches down from the old elm tree.

Matthew the while, still the ringleader of this dastardly crew, was directing these gruesome operations.

"Hist!" he admonished incessantly, "not so much noise... We don't want the guard to come this way, do we?.. Now, John the smith, quick, where's thy resin?.. James the wheelwright, thy tinder, friend... Here! these faggots are not close enough... Some more on the left there!"

And the men, as alert as their clumsy bodies would allow, as quick as the darkness would permit, groaning, sweating, falling up against one another, worked with a will to accomplish the end which they had in view.

To burn the witch!

And she, the woman, her poor wits almost gone at sight of this fast approaching, inevitable doom, did not attempt to struggle. Had the gag been removed from her mouth she would not have uttered a sound.

Nature, more merciful than her own children, had paralysed the brain of the wretched girl and left her semi-imbecile, crazed, watching now with uncomprehending eyes the preparations for her own appalling death.

"Watch how the witch will burn!" said Matthew in a hoarse whisper. "Her soul will fly out of her mouth, and it'll be shaped like a black cat."

They had all descended the steps and were standing in a semicircle on the turf below, looking up at the miserable holocaust which they were about to offer up to their own cowardly superstition.

James the wheelwright was busy with his tinder, with John the smith bending over him, ready with a resin torch, which would start the conflagration.

And Mirrab, looking down on them with lack-lustre, idiotic eyes! Her body had fallen in a strange, shapeless heap across the leather bonds which held her, her feet were buried in the pile of faggots, whilst her fingers worked convulsively behind the flagstaff to which they were tied.

Ye gods, what a spectacle!

The Duke of Wessex, having taken leave of his friend, had been idly strolling towards the witch's booth, always closely followed by faithful Harry Plantagenet. At first sight of a group of men dimly outlined in the darkness he scarcely realized what was happening.

The fitful flicker of the torch, as the resin became ignited, threw the more distant figure of the woman into complete gloom.

Then there was a sudden shout of triumph. The torch was blazing at last.

"The holy fire!.. Burn the witch!"

John the smith, holding the torch aloft, inspired by the enthusiasm of his friends, had turned towards the steps.

For the space of one second the red glow illumined that helpless bundle of gaudy tinsel only dimly suggesting a woman's form beneath it, which hung limply from the flagstaff.

Then Wessex understood.

He had already drawn nigh, attracted by idle curiosity, but now with one bound he reached the steps. Striking out with his fists at two or three men who barred the way, he suddenly stood confronting these miscreants, the light of the torch glowing on the rich silk of his doublet, the jewelled agraffe of his hat, his proud, serious face almost distorted by overwhelming wrath.

"What damnable piece of mischief is this?" he said peremptorily.

He had scarcely raised his voice, for they were all silent, having retreated somewhat at sight of this stranger who barred the way.

The instinct of submission and deference to the lord was inborn in the country lout of these days. Their first movement was one of respectful awe. But this was only momentary. The excitement was too great, too real, to give way to this gallant, alone with only an elegant sword to stand between him and the mad desire for the witch's death.

"Out of the way, stranger!" shouted Matthew lustily from the rear of the group, "this is no place for fine gentlemen. Up with thy torch, John the smith! No one interferes here!"

"No! no! forward, John the smith!" exclaimed the others as with one voice.

But John the smith, torch in hand, could not very well advance. The fine gentleman was standing on the steps above him with a long pointed sword in his hand.

"The first one of you who sets foot on these steps is a dead man," he had said as soon as the shouts had subsided.

John the smith did not altogether care to be that notable first.

"Here! Harry, old friend," added the Duke, calling his dog to his side, "you see these miscreants there, when I say 'Go!' you have my permission to spring at the throat of the man who happens to be on these steps at the time."

Harry Plantagenet no doubt understood what was expected of him. His great jaws were slightly open, showing a powerful set of very unpleasant-looking teeth; otherwise for the moment he looked placid enough. He stood at the very top of the steps, his head on a level with his master's shoulder, and was wagging his tail in a pleasant, friendly spirit.

Matthew, however, had, not unjustly up to now, earned the respect of his friends. Whilst John the smith was still hesitating, he had already made a quick mental calculation that one Court gallant

and his dog could be no real match against five-and-twenty lusty fellows with hard fists, who were determined to get their own way.

He elbowed his way to the front, pushed the smith aside, and began peremptorily —

"Stranger! —"

"Call me not stranger, dolt, I am the Duke of Wessex, and if thou dost not immediately betake thyself elsewhere, I'll have thee whipped till thou bleed. Now then, ye louts!" he added, addressing the now paralysed group of men, "off with your caps in my presence — quick's the word!"

There was dead silence, broken only by an occasional groan of real, tangible fright.

"The Duke of Wessex! Merciful heavens! he'll have us all hanged!" murmured Matthew as he fell on his knees.

One by one, still in complete silence, the caps were doffed. His Grace of Wessex! Future King of England mayhap! And they had dared to threaten him!

"Holy Virgin protect the lot of us!"

One man, more alert than his fellows, well in the rear of the group, began crawling away on hands and knees, hoping to escape unobserved. One or two saw his intention and immediately followed him. John the smith had already dropped his torch, which lay smouldering on the ground.

There was a distinct movement in the direction of general retreat.

"Well," laughed the Duke good-naturedly, "have you done enough mischief?.. Get ye gone, all of you! — or shall I have to call the guard and have you all whipped for a set of dastardly cowards, eh?.. Or better still, hanged, as your leader and friend here suggests — what?"

They had no need to be told twice. Still silently they picked up their caps, one or two of them scratched their addled pates. They were ashamed and really frightened, and had quite forgotten all about the witch.

There's nothing like real, personal danger to allay imaginary terrors. The devil was all very well, but he was a long way off, and for the moment invisible, whilst His Grace of Wessex was really there, and he was — well! he was His Grace of Wessex, and that's all about it.

One by one they edged away, and the darkness soon swallowed them up. The Duke never moved until the last of them had gone, leaving only Abra and his henchman cowering in terror beside the platform.

From behind a bank of clouds the pale, crescent moon suddenly emerged and threw a faint silvery light on the now deserted scene of the dastardly outrage.

"Well, Harry, my friend, I think that's the last of them." said Wessex lightly as he finally put up his sword and mounted the steps to the platform.

Mirrab's long strands of golden hair hung like a veil over her face and breast; she had straightened herself out somewhat, but her head was still bent. Her tottering reason was very slowly and gradually returning to her.

She did not even move whilst Wessex undid the leather belts which tied her to the flagstaff, and with his heel kicked the faggots to one side. She seemed as unconscious now of her safety as she had been a short while ago of her impending doom.

As her last bonds were severed she fell like a shapeless bundle on her knees.

He never looked at her. What was she but a poor tattered wreck of humanity, whom his timely interference had saved from an appalling death? But he was very sorry for her, because she was a woman, and had just gone through indescribable sufferings; in that gentle, impersonal pity, there was no room for the mere curiosity to know what she was like.

Before he finally turned to go, he placed a well-filled purse on the ground, not far from where she was cowering, and said very kindly —

"Take my advice, girl, and do not get thyself into any more mischief of this sort. Next time there might be no one nigh to get thee out of trouble. Come, Harry," he added, calling to his dog, "time is getting late."

At the foot of the steps he came across the shrinking forms of Abra and his companion. The Duke paused for a moment and said more sternly —

"As for thee, sirrah, get thee gone, bag and baggage, thy tents and thy trickeries, before the night is half an hour older. The guard shall be sent to protect thee; but if thou art still here an hour hence, those sobered ruffians will have returned, and nothing'll save thee and thy wench a second time."

He waited for no protestations from the abject wizard, and turned his steps towards the river.

As he was crossing the open space, however, he suddenly felt a tight grip on his cloak; he turned, yet could see nothing, for the capricious moon had once more hidden her light behind a passing cloud, and the darkness, by contrast, seemed all the more intense.

But he heard a sound which was very like a sob, and then a murmur which had a curious ring of passion in it —

"Thou hast saved my life.. 'tis thine.. I give it thee!.. Henceforth, whene'er I read the starlit firmament I'll pray to God that the most glorious star in heaven shall guide thy destiny!"

He gave a pleasant laugh, gently disengaged his cloak, and without another word went his way.

PART II

THE LADY URSULA

CHAPTER X

A BEVY OF FAIR MAIDENS

Never in all her life had Her Grace of Lincoln experienced anything so awful.

Her very coif, usually a pattern of propriety, looked awry and scarcely sober on her dear old head, whilst her round, chubby face, a beautiful forest of tangled wrinkles, expressed the most dire distress, coupled with hopeless, pathetic bewilderment.

"Well?" she repeated over and over again in breathless eagerness.

She seemed scarce to notice the pretty picture before her – two young girls standing with arms linked round one another's waists, eyes aglow with excitement, and cheeks made rosy with the palpitating intensity of the narrative.

Yet was not Her Grace justly proud of the flock of fair maids committed to her charge? What more charming than these two specimens of austere Queen Mary's dainty maids-of-honour, with their slim figures in the stiff corsets and unwieldy farthingales, their unruly curls held in becomingly by delicate lace coifs, and the sombre panelling of the room throwing up in harmonious contrast the vivid colouring of robes and kerchiefs, of lace and of complexion?

But to-day the Duchess of Lincoln had no eye for the charming sight. Leaning well forward in her high, straight-backed chair, her fat, be-ringed fingers were beating a veritable devil's tattoo against its brocaded arms.

"Alicia, girl, why don't you go on?" she added impatiently. "La! I vow the wench'll make me die of choler."

Alicia, in the eagerness of telling her thrilling story, had somewhat lost her breath; but now she made a vigorous effort to resume.

"Well," she said, "Your Grace must remember the night was very dark. Barbara and I were strolling by the low wall, when suddenly the clouds parted, the river was flooded with light, and just below us, not ten paces away, we saw –"

But here she broke off suddenly. A look of genuine distress crossed her piquant little face; she looked inquiringly at her companion, then at the Duchess, whilst her merry eyes began to fill with tears.

"Oh! I scarce like to repeat it," she said hesitatingly at last, "for truly I love her so."

But Her Grace was in no mood to pander to girlish sentimentality just now. Her small round eyes, usually alive with good-nature and kindness, were looking positively stern.

"Go on, child," she commanded, "cannot you see that I am verily sitting on pins? Was it – was it the Lady Ursula you saw?"

"Nay, madam," protested Alicia feebly, "'twas Barbara saw her – I do not believe that it was Ursula."

"She was wrapped in a dark cloak from head to foot," here interposed the other young maid. "When we called she looked up, but, seeing us, immediately fled along the bank."

"Then the clouds obscured the moon again, and we saw nothing more," resumed Alicia. "Barbara may have been mistaken."

Barbara nodded, quite longing to convince herself that she had indeed been mistaken. The two girls were getting more and more confused. Clearly they had no wish to get their absent friend into

trouble, and, having been led into relating their experiences of the night before, they tardily realized that they were collecting storm-clouds over Lady Ursula's unsuspecting head.

With all her good-nature the Duchess was a stern disciplinarian, taking herself and her duties very seriously. When the Queen entrusted her with the formation of her own immediate feminine entourage, she also expressed a desire that her maids-of-honour and ladies-in-waiting should be models of decorum and veritable patterns of all the virtues.

The Court, which had been little else than a name in the old and gloomy palace of Richmond and the simple household at Esher, had seen some of its old glories revived since Mary's proclamation as sole and royal liege lady, Queen Sovereign of England.

Before and since the coronation, Hampton Court had once more become alive with merriment and laughter, with tennis and bowling games, jousts, suppers, and balls even, as in the best days of King Harry. Young people, who had been only temporarily sobered through the raging political conflicts of the past few months, quickly reasserted their desire for gaiety and splendour, and the Queen herself, somewhat softened with the joy of seeing England's loyalty towards her, tacitly acquiesced in this return to the ancient magnificence of her father's court.

Moreover, there were the foreign ambassadors to entertain, all eager to secure the Queen's hand for their respective royal masters, and in the meanwhile equally ready to be impressed with the luxuries of the English Court and the beauty and grace of its ladies.

The Duchess of Lincoln's task was certes no easy one, since it involved the keeping in order of a very attractive, pleasure-loving, highly unruly little flock.

So far, however, nothing serious had occurred to disturb her equanimity. The maids-of-honour placed under her charge had quickly succumbed to the charm of Her Grace's kindliness, and were easily ruled with the rod of good-nature.

Some scoldings and lectures, an admonition now and then, or a threat of more severe punishment, had readily quelled any incipient insubordination.

But since the arrival of Lady Ursula Glynde at the Palace matters had become more serious. The child was so terribly independent, so self-willed and unruly, and with it all so sweet and lovable, that the Duchess found all her scoldings of absolutely no avail.

Ursula defied her, then kissed and fondled her, rendering her absolutely helpless and defying her authority.

When it was discovered that the naughty child had, on the very day following Her Majesty's coronation, visited East Molesey Fair, masked and veiled, and attended only by weak-willed, silly Margaret Cobham, Her Grace felt nigh to having the palsy. But even that unseemly escapade was nothing in comparison with the terrible revelations which had recently come to Her Grace's ears. One or two rumours had already gained currency that one of Her Majesty's maids-of-honour had been seen alone and at night outside the purlieu of the Palace. So far, fortunately, the Queen knew nothing of this, nor had it been talked about among the gentlemen of the Court.

Heavens above! if such a thing were to happen!.

"A scandal!" moaned the Duchess piteously, "a scandal in my department! Oh, I shall never survive it! If Her Majesty should hear of it, who is so austere, so pious!.. And with my lord Cardinal staying in the Palace just now... What would he think of the morals of an English Court!.. Oh! the naughty, wicked child, thus to bring disgrace upon us all."

Some of the rumours anent Lady Ursula's mysterious nightly wanderings had already reached her; she had placed the other girls under severe cross-examination, and finally elicited from them the confirmation of her worst fears.

"Nay, madam," rejoined Alicia, tardily smitten with remorse, "I feel sure she means no harm. Ursula is gay, a madcap, full of fun, but she is too proud to stoop to an intrigue."

"Aye! but, child, she hath vanity," said the Duchess, shaking her grey curls, "and vanity is an evil counsellor. And, remember, 'tis not the first time she has been seen alone, at night, outside the purlieu of the garden. The Lord protect us! I should never survive a scandal."

"An Your Grace would believe me," added Barbara consolingly, "I think 'tis but a bit of foolish curiosity on the Lady Ursula's part."

But Her Grace would not be consoled.

"Curiosity?" she said. "Alas! 'tis an evil moment when curiosity leads a maiden out of doors at night.. alone.. Oh!"

And she made a gesture of such horror, there was such a look of stern condemnation in her kind old face, that the two girls began to feel really afraid as to what might befall that madcap, Ursula Glynde.

No one had ever seen the Duchess actually angry.

They were all ready to take up the cudgels for the absent girl now.

"Nay! 'tis harmless curiosity enough," said Alicia hotly. "Ursula is being very badly treated."

"Badly treated!" exclaimed Her Grace.

"Aye! she is affianced to the Duke of Wessex."

"Well, and what of it, child?"

"What of it?" retorted the girl indignantly, "she is never allowed to see him. The moment His Grace is expected to arrive in the Queen's presence, 'tis – 'Lady Ursula, you may retire. I shall not need your services to-day.'"

And looking straight down her pretty nose, dainty Lady Alicia Wrenford pursed her lips and put on the starchy airs of a soured matron of forty.

The Duchess of Lincoln threw up her hands in horror.

"Fie on you, child!" she said sternly, "mimicking Her Majesty."

"'Tis quite true what Alicia says," here interposed Barbara, pouting; "everything is done to keep Ursula out of His Grace's way. And we, too, are made the scapegoats of this silly intrigue."

"Barbara, I forbid you to talk like that!"

"I mean nothing disrespectful, madam, yet 'tis patent to every one. Why are we relegated to this dreary old chamber this brilliant afternoon, when my lord the Cardinal and all the foreign ambassadors are at the Palace? Why are we not allowed to join the others at tennis, or watch the gentlemen at bowls? Why were Helen and Margaret kept from seeing the jousts? Why? Why? Why?"

She was stamping her little foot, eager, impatient, excited. The Duchess felt somewhat bewildered before this hurricane of girlish wrath.

"Because Her Majesty ordered it thus, child," she said in a more conciliatory spirit; "she hath not always need of all her maids-of-honour round her."

"Nay! that's not the reason," rejoined Barbara, "and Your Grace is too clever to believe it."

"You are a silly child and –"

"Then we are all silly, for 'tis patent to us all. 'Tis Ursula who is being kept wilfully away from the Court, or rather from seeing His Grace of Wessex, and in order not to make these machinations too obvious, some of us are also relegated in the background in her company."

"And 'tis small wonder that Ursula should wish to catch sight of the man whom her father vowed she should wed or else enter into a convent," concluded Alicia defiantly.

Her Grace was at her wits' ends. Too clever not to have noticed the intrigue to which the girls now made reference, she would sooner have died than owned that her Queen was acting wrongfully or even pettily.

However, for the moment she was spared the further discussion of this unpleasant topic, for a long, merry, girlish laugh was suddenly heard echoing through the great chambers beyond.

"Hush!" said the Duchess with reassumed severity, "'tis that misguided child herself. Now remember, ladies, not a word of all this. I must learn the truth on this scandal, and will set a watch to-night. But not a word to her."

The next moment the subject of all this animated conversation threw open the heavy oak door of the room. She came running in, with her fair hair flying in a deliriously mad tangle round her shoulders, her eyes dancing with glee, whilst above her head she was, with one small hand, flourishing a small piece of paper, the obvious cause of this apparently uncontrollable fit of girlish merriment.

CHAPTER XI

THE FAIREST OF THEM ALL

The Duchess was frowning for all she was worth. Alicia and Barbara tried to look serious, but were obviously only too ready to join in any frolic which happened to be passing in Ursula Glynde's lively little head.

"Oh!" said the latter, as soon as she had partially recovered her breath. "Oh! I vow 'tis the best of the bunch."

With the freedom of a spoilt child, who knows how welcome are its caresses, Ursula sidled up to the Duchess of Lincoln and sat down upon the arm of her chair.

"Your Grace, a share of your seat I entreat," she said gaily, heedless of stern looks. "Nay! I'll die of laughing unless you let me read you this."

"Child! child!" admonished the Duchess, still trying to look severe, "this loud laughter is most unseemly – and your cheeks all ablaze! What is it now?"

"What is it, sweet Grace?" responded the young girl. "A poem! Listen!"

She smoothed out the piece of paper, spread it out upon her knee and began reading solemnly:

—
"If all the world were sought so farre
Who could find such a wight?
Her beauty twinkleth like a starre
Within the frosty night.
Her roseall colour comes and goes
With such a comely grace,
More ruddier too than doth the rose,
Within her lively face."

"And beneath this sonnet," she continued, "a drawing – see! – a heart pierced by a dagger. *His* heart —*my* beauty which twinkleth like a starre!"

Who could resist the joy and gladness, the freshness, the youth, the girlishness which emanated from Ursula's entire personality? The two other girls pressed closely round her, giggling like school-children at sight of the rough, sentimental device affixed to the love poem.

The Duchess vainly endeavoured to keep up a semblance of sternness, but she could not meet those laughing eyes, now dark, now blue, now an ever-changing grey, alive with irrepressible mischief, yet full of loving tenderness. She felt that her wrath would soon melt in the sunshine of that girlish smile.

"Lady Ursula, this is most unseemly," she said as coldly as she could. "How came you by this poem?"

Ursula threw her arms round the feebly-resisting old dame.

"Hush!" she whispered, "in your dear old ears! I found it, sweet Duchess.. beside my stockings.. when I came out of my bath!"

"Horror!"

"Now, Duchess! dear, sweet, darling, beautiful Duchess, tell me, who think you wrote this poem? And who —*who* think you placed it near my stockings?"

The Duchess was almost speechless, partly through genuine horror, but chiefly because a sweet, fresh face was pressed closely to her old cheek.

"'Twas not the Earl of Norfolk," continued Ursula meditatively. She seemed quite unconscious of the enormity of her offence, and sought the eyes of her young friends in confirmation of these

various surmises. "He cannot write verses. Nor could it be my lord of Overcliffe, for he would not know where to find my stockings."

"The vanity of the child!" sighed Her Grace. "Think you these great gentlemen would write verses to a chit of a girl like you?"

But her kind eyes, resting with obvious pride on the dainty figure beside her, belied the severity of her words.

"Yes," replied Ursula decisively, "bad ones! – not such beautiful verses as these."

Then she went on with her conjectures.

"And there's my lord of Everingham, and the Marquis of Taunton, and – "

"His Grace of Wessex," suggested Alicia archly, despite the Duchess's warning frown.

"Alas, no!" sighed Ursula, "for he has never been allowed to see me."

"Ursula!" came in ever-recurring feeble protests from the old dowager.

But the young girl was wholly unabashed.

"But he *will* see me – before to-night," she said.

The others exchanged significant glances.

"To-night?"

"Yes! What have I said? Why do you all look like that?"

"Because your conduct, child, is positively wanton," said the Duchess.

But Ursula only hugged the kind old soul all the more closely.

"Now – now," she coaxed, "don't be angry, darling. There! – look!" she added with mock horror, "your coif is all awry."

With deft fingers she rearranged the delicate lace cap over Her Grace's white curls.

"So," she said, "now you look pretty again – and your nice, fat cheeks have the sweetest of dimples. Nay, I vow, all these young gallants only sigh with love for me because *you* frown on them so!"

"What a madcap!" sighed the Duchess, mollified.

"You won't be angry with me?" queried the girl earnestly.

"Nay! that depends what mad pranks you have been after."

"Sh – sh! – sh! – 'tis a deadly secret. Barbara, Alicia, come a little closer."

She paused a moment, whilst all three of them crowded round Her Grace of Lincoln's chair.

Then Ursula said solemnly —

"The Queen is in love with my future husband!"

The Duchess of Lincoln nearly fell backwards in a faint.

"Ursula!" she gasped.

"Nay, that's not the secret," continued Ursula, quite unperturbed, "for that is town-talk, and every one at Court knows that she won't let him see me for fear he should fall in love with me. And my lord Cardinal is furious because he wants the Queen to marry Philip of Spain, and he is wishing His Grace of Wessex down there, where all naughty Cardinals go."

"Child!.. child!.."

"But the days are slipping by, darling," added the young girl, with just a shade of seriousness in her eyes. "All these intriguers may fight as much as they like, but if I do not wed His Grace of Wessex, if he should be inveigled into marrying the Queen, I must to the convent. My dear father made me swear it on his deathbed, when I was beside myself with grief, and scarce knew what I did. 'There is but one true gentleman to whom I would trust my child,' he said to me; 'swear to me, Ursula, that if Wessex claims you not, that you will never marry any one else, but spend your days in happy singleness in a convent. Swear it, little one.' He was so ill, so dear, I swore and – "

"The convent is the proper place for such a feather-brain as yourself," concluded the Duchess with as gruff a voice as she could command.

"But I do not wish to be a nun," protested Ursula, as tears began to gather in her eyes, "and I do want to wed Wessex, who is handsome – and gallant – and witty – and – and," she added coquettishly, "when he sees me – I vow he'll not let me go to a convent either, so – "

She leant closer to the kind dowager and once more whispered confidentially in her ear.

"So, as the Queen is engaged in prayers for at least half an hour, I've sent His Grace word by one of the pages that the Duchess of Lincoln desired his presence in this chamber – here!"

But this was really past bearing.

"I!" exclaimed the Duchess in horror. "I?.. desire his presence?.. Merciful heavens! what will His Grace think?"

Once more Ursula, like the veritable child that she was, was dancing like mad round the room, now alone, clapping her tiny hands together, then seizing one of her companions by the waist, she whirled with her, round and round, until she fell back breathless against the Duchess's chair. And all the while her tongue went prattling on, now talking at top speed, anon singing out the words in the madness of her glee.

"And he is coming, dear Duchess," she said. "He'll attend upon Her Grace at once!" these were his words to that pet of a page, and he'll see me – and – and – "

Now she paused, kneeling beside her old friend, putting coaxing arms round the bulky figure of the kind soul.

"But don't tell him my name all at once, Duchess darling," she whispered entreatingly; "let him fall in love with me without knowing that I am his affianced bride – for that might prejudice him against me. Just mumble something when he asks my name, and let me do the rest. Give me another kiss, darling. Alicia – Alicia," she cried in feverish anxiety, "is my kerchief straight at the back? and – and – oh, my hair!"

Still in that same madly-excited mood, she ran to a small oval mirror which hung on one of the walls, close to the great bay window.

The Duchess during that brief moment's respite tried to collect her scattered wits.

"But oh! what shall I say to His Grace?" she moaned distractedly. "Child! child! to your folly there is no end!"

A quickly smothered shriek from Ursula now brought the other girls to her side in the embrasure. She was pointing across the court to the gateway beneath the clock tower.

"He is coming!" she cried, with a slightly nervous tremor in her voice. "It is he, with my lord Everingham; they are laughing and talking together... Oh, how handsome he looks!" she added enthusiastically. "My future husband, *my* lord, not the Queen's – mine own, mine own! Alicia, tell me, hast ever seen a more goodly sight than that of *my* future husband in that beautiful silken doublet and with that dear, dear dog of his walking so proudly behind him? Harry Plantagenet, thou'rt a lucky dog, and I'll kiss thee first, and – and – "

Then she ran back to the Duchess.

"Two minutes to mount the stairs, two more to cross the Great Hall, then the watching chamber, the presence chamber... In six minutes he will be here – hush! – I hear a footstep!.. Holy Virgin, how my heart beats!"

There had come a discreet knock at the door. All four women were too excited to respond, but the next moment the door was opened and a young page, dressed in the same gorgeous livery which Henry VIII had originally prescribed, entered and bowed to the ladies.

Then he turned to the Duchess of Lincoln.

"Her Majesty the Queen desires the immediate presence of Her Grace and of her maids-of-honour in the Oratory."

There was dead silence in the room whilst the page once more bowed in the elaborate manner ordained by Court etiquette; then he walked backwards to the door, and stood there, holding it open ready for the ladies to pass.

"No, no, no!" whispered Ursula excitedly, as the Duchess immediately rose to obey.

"Ladies!" commanded Her Grace.

"One minute, darling," entreated Ursula, "just one short little minute!"

But where the Queen's commands were concerned Her Grace of Lincoln was adamant.

"Ladies!" she ordered once more.

Alicia and Barbara, though terribly disappointed at the failure of the exciting conspiracy, were ready enough to obey. Ursula wildly ran back to the window.

"I can see his silhouette and that of my lord Everingham slowly moving across the Great Hall," she said.

"Oh! why is he so slow?"

The Duchess turned to the page.

"Precede!" she commanded. "We'll follow."

She then pointed to the door. Alicia and Barbara, endeavouring to look grave, walked out with becoming dignity.

Her Grace went up to Ursula, who was still clinging to the window embrasure with passionate obstinacy.

"Lady Ursula Glynde," she said sternly, "if you do not obey Her Majesty's commands instantly, you'll be dismissed the Court this very day."

And while His Grace of Wessex was slowly wending his way towards the chamber where he had been so eagerly expected, Lady Ursula, defiant and rebellious, was being peremptorily marshalled off in an opposite direction.

CHAPTER XII

INTRIGUES

When Wessex, accompanied by his friend, reached the room which so lately was echoing with merry girlish laughter, he was met by a page, deputed by the Duchess of Lincoln to present her excuses to His Grace for her non-appearance.

"Nay! marry, this is the bravest comedy ever witnessed," laughed the Duke, when the boy had gone.

"What, my lord?" asked Everingham with seeming unconcern.

"A comedy, friend, in which the Queen, Her Grace of Lincoln, you, and His Eminence the Cardinal, all play leading rôles."

"I don't understand."

"Well done, man! Nay! I know not yet which of you will win; but this I know, that whilst I do my best to whisper sweet nothings in Her Majesty's ear, you are pleased, the Cardinal is furious, and the Duchess of Lincoln discreetly keeps my affianced bride out of my way."

"For this at least Your Grace should be grateful," rejoined his friend with a smile.

"Grateful that other people should guide my destiny for me? Well, perhaps! 'Twould certes have been ungallant to flee from danger, when danger takes the form of a future wife. I cannot picture myself saying to a lady: 'Madam, honour demands that I should wed you, and thus hath put it out of my power ever to love you.' But since the Lady Ursula is so unapproachable, marry! – methinks I am almost free!"

"Perchance it is the lady herself who avoids Your Grace."

"Nay! undoubtedly she does. Poor girl! how she must hate the very thought of me. Her dear father, I fear me, was wont to sing my praises in her childish ears; now that she hath arrived at years of discretion, my very name must have become an obsession to her. Obviously even a convent must be preferable. Then why this mad desire to keep us apart? Mutual understanding would do that soon enough."

The two men had once more turned to go back the way they came; slowly they strolled across the vast and lofty rooms and through the Great Hall, which, deserted at this time of day, was the scene of so much gaiety and magnificence during the evening hours.

"Your Grace, methinks, must be mistaken," said Everingham after a while; "there is, at any rate on the part of your friends, no desire to keep you and the Lady Ursula apart; you are best judge of your own honour, my lord, and no one would presume to dictate to you; but the most sensitive conscience in England could but hold the opinion that, whilst the lady may feel bound by her promise to her father, you are as free as air – free to wed whom you choose."

"By the mass! what an anomaly, friend! Free to wed! free to wear fetters! the most terrible chains ever devised by the turpitude of man."

"Marriage is a great institution – "

"Nay! 'tis an evil one, contrived out of malice by priests and old maids to enchain a woman who would rather be free to a man who speedily becomes bored."

"Nay! but when that woman is a queen?"

"Take off her crown and what is she, friend?" rejoined His Grace lightly. "A woman.. to be desired, of course, to be loved, by all means – but at whose feet we should only recline long enough to make all other men envious, and one woman jealous."

Everingham frowned. He hated this flippant, careless mood of his friend. He did not understand it. To him the idea of such a possibility as a union with the Queen of England was so great, so wonderful, so superhuman almost, that he felt that the man who deserved such incommensurate honour should spend half his days on his knees, thanking God for such a glorious destiny.

That Wessex hung back when Mary herself was holding out her hand to him seemed to this enthusiast almost a sacrilege.

"But surely you have ambition, my lord?" he said at last.

"Ambition?" replied Wessex with characteristic light-heartedness. "Yes, one! – to be a boy again."

"Nay! an you were that now, you could not understand all that England expects of you. The Queen is harassed by the Cardinal and the Spanish ambassador. Philip but desires her hand in order to lay the iron heel of Spain upon the neck of submissive England. Your Grace can save us all. Mary loves you, would wed you to-morrow."

"And send me to the block for my infidelities – supposed or real – the day after, and be free to wed Philip or the Dauphin after all."

"I'll not believe it."

"Friend! do you know what you ask of me? To marry – that is to say to give up all that makes life poetic, beautiful, amusing, the love which lasts a day, the delights which live one hour, woman in her most alluring aspect, the unattainable; and in exchange what do you offer me – the smaller half of a crown."

"The gratitude of a nation." protested Everingham.

"Ah! A woman, however fickle she may be, is more constant than a nation.. As for gratitude?.. nay, my lord.. let us not speak of the gratitude of nations."

"This is not your last word, friend," pleaded Lord Everingham earnestly.

They had reached the foot of the stairs, and were once more under the gateway of the clock tower, where Lady Ursula Glynde had caught sight of them from the great bay-window opposite.

It was a glorious afternoon. October, always lovely in England, was more beautiful and mellow this year than it had ever been. Wessex paused a moment, with his slender hand placed affectionately on his friend's shoulder. He looked round him – at the great windows of the hall, the vast enclosure of the Base Court beyond, the distant tower of the chapel visible above the fantastic roofs and gables of Henry VIII's chambers, the massive, imposing grandeur of the great pile which had seen so many tragedies, witnessed so many sorrows, so many downfalls, such treachery and such horrible deaths. A shudder seemed to go through his powerful frame, a look of resolution, of pride, and of absolute disdain crept into his lazy, deep-set eyes. Then he said quietly —

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