

A GRAPHIC GIANT



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# King's Rogue

Max Peacock



BOLD ROMANCE—SAUCY INTRIGUE—HIGH ADVENTURE!

Complete and Unabridged





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## Max Peacock

GRAPHIC BOOKS

*Complete and Unabridged*

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# **King's Rogue**



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## O N E

### *A Gentleman Hanged*

AROUND Foskitt's barber shop in Golden Harp Alley a crowd was collected. It was early, about half-past seven in the morning—a dark November morning, and bitterly cold. A tumult of whirling cloud scudded low overhead, there were a few flakes of snow in the air, and the strong northeast wind that blew seemed, in that narrow defile between the houses, to have the force of a hurricane.

The crowd filled the street from side to side, a swaying, jostling mass of close-packed humanity. Its members were typical of the district from which they sprang—the network of crooked alleys and noisome courts that stretched eastward from Shoe Lane to the Fleet Ditch. They were a dirty lot, ragged and unkempt; pallid, hungry-looking men and blowsy slatterns of women, with a sprinkling of youthful apprentices and half-grown children. Villainous faces were there aplenty; it would have needed but a spark to turn such an assemblage into a raging mob.

At the moment, however, their demeanor was quiet. They had not come to do violence, but to stare. Every doorstep or other eminence which

afforded a vantage point was an object of dispute, and in the adjoining houses, half-dressed fathers of families fought with their wives and offspring for places at the windows. Over the door of the barber's shop projected the pole that was the emblem of his trade, and from the end of it dangled the object at which they stared.

It was the body of a man hanging by the neck, slowly revolving, and swinging to and fro in the wind. The legs were tied together at the ankles and the arms fastened behind the back; the face was flushed to a dusky purple and horribly distorted, with bulging eyes, wide-open mouth, out-thrust tongue, and lips drawn back into a ghastly grin. Besides the rope by which the body hung, there was also round the neck a thin cord, from which depended a sheet of paper that fluttered wildly in the blast.

To most of the members of the crowd, probably, a dead man was no novelty. Alsatia, the rogues' sanctuary, where murder and sudden death were matters of almost daily occurrence, was only a few minutes' walk away on the other side of Fleet Street. But they had never before awakened of a morning to find a man hanging from a barber pole; that, at any rate, had the merit of being unusual. So they came by the dozen, rushing to see—and shouting and guffawing too, until the sight of that ghastly face gave them pause.

Foskitt, the barber, peering terrified through the doorway of his shop, assured them many a time that

the affair was none of his. *He* had not put the man up there, he declared, his voice rising shrill above the din. The assurance was unnecessary, for no one was in the least likely to suppose that he had. The body on the pole was that of a robust man in the prime of life, and Ezekiel Foskitt was an undersized rat of a fellow, well known to go in fear even of his own wife.

"I was in bed all night," he said. "In bed wi' my wife, and she can vouch for it."

"But didn't ye hear aught?" someone asked. "How could they hang him there and you not hear 'em?"

"Well, I did hear some'un outside," the barber admitted. "It was about an hour after midnight. Two men, there was, or maybe three, and a horse. They were down here under the pole, but I couldn't tell what they were doin'. It weren't till I got up this mornin' that I saw him hangin' there. And that's the truth, so help me God! I dunno nothin' about it."

"H'm! What's that paper round his neck? There's words on it—writin'. What's it say?"

The barber shook his head. He was no doubt a skilful wielder of a razor, but the art of reading was beyond him. There were others in the crowd who were better informed, however, and their attention having been drawn to the paper, two or three of them forced their way to the front. But they too had to confess themselves at a loss. With them it was not a question of literary skill, but of eyesight. No man on earth, they declared, could read what was written on

a piece of paper while it fluttered in the air six feet above his head.

"We'll need to get him down," said one, a black-clad, Puritanical-looking person with a tuft of dirty gray beard. He seized the body by the feet and gave it a number of violent jerks, but it held firm. "Hey! any of ye got a ladder?" he bawled.

There was a ladder, it seemed, in a neighboring woodyard, and after some delay it was brought. The Puritanical one ran up it as nimbly as a cat, whipped out a long sheath knife, and hacked through the rope by which the body was suspended. It fell like a stone, striking the ground feet first and pitching forward onto its face. One of those below turned it over with his foot, and another grabbed at the still fluttering sheet of paper. He read what was written out loud.

*PATRICK HOGAN,*

*A PAPIST SPY.*

*Hanged by me, Colonel Blood,*

*This 9th day of November, 1670.*

*The body to be sent to*

*His Grace of Ormond, at Clarendon House.*

*LIKE ROGUES TAKE WARNING.*

Such were the written words, but it took some time to make the mass of the crowd understand them. At the first reading only half a dozen or so of the nearest were able to hear. The strong wind tore away the words from the reader's mouth and whirled them into nothingness. As a result there was much argu-

ment and shouting; half-heard questions received unintelligible answers, and the name "Colonel Blood" was bandied back and forth, with suitable oaths and ejaculations.

It was the Puritanical gentleman who put a stop to the confusion. Descending from his perch on the ladder, he darted at the man who held the paper and snatched it out of his hands. Then, with a "Hey!" he was away again, twisting through the crowd like an eel, and presently he reappeared halfway up the ladder. For a man of his age—he seemed to be between fifty and sixty—the speed of his movements was amazing.

"Quiet now, and listen to me. Quiet your tongues!" he howled in a piercing falsetto. "This is Colonel Blood's work! 'Tis written here." He waved the paper aloft. "Colonel Blood—d'ye hear?"

"Ayl!" someone roared in reply. "Colonel Blood, we know that. And to hell with him, we say! What's he want to do his murderin' work here for?"

"Hey? Is that the way of it? To hell with him, ye say? And how if he be here a-listenin' to ye? How then, hey?"

The uproar of the crowd died down to an uneasy muttering, and its members eyed one another askance. What the man had suggested was not impossible. None of them knew Colonel Blood by sight, and any strange face in the crowd might be his. They all knew of him; his fame was full-blown, and the tale of his villainies had been in men's mouths for years.

But he and his followers had the knack of keeping themselves personally unknown, a fact which added not a little to their sinister reputation.

"See now!" the orator continued shrilly. "This ain't the first time he's hung a man, not by a long way. There was one last week on College Hill; didn't ye hear of it? And this feller, he's a Papist. 'Tis written so on the paper. A Papist—an idolater, an abomination unto the Lord! A Jesuit, maybe, plottin' to bring us back under the heel o' the Pope—battle and murder, the rack and the thumbscrew, God knows what! Ain't it right that such a man should hang? Ain't it justice? I'm askin' ye."

The word "Papist" was always a safe tune on which to play. Nothing was too bad for the unfortunate Catholics, no accusation against them too wild to be believed. A growl ran around the assembly; the dead man's body was kicked and jostled, and one gentleman deliberately spat into its face. Only the barber seemed to have any doubts as to the right and justice of the hanging and his, it appeared, were dictated by self-interest.

"But what did they want to hang him here for?" he asked fretfully. "I'm no Papist and never had aught to do with 'em. Nor yet with Colonel Blood. I've lived here peaceable all my days, and now—"

"Tchah! Hold your tongue, fool!" the man on the ladder screeched. "Nobody's goin' to blame you for it. It's written down on this paper, I say, that he was hanged by Colonel Blood. And wait a minute—that's

not all! It says the body is to be sent to the Duke of Ormond. Ormond, ye'll mark—an Irisher, another Papist. It seems to me there's some plot afoot."

"The Duke of Ormond ain't a Papist!" a man in the crowd shouted.

"Hey?" The fellow on the ladder leaned forward and stared at the speaker. "He's not a Papist? D'ye tell me that? And him Irish. Why, there's never a one of them but what isn't a Papist at heart."

"The Duke of Ormond ain't—I'll take my oath on it."

The duke's champion was an elderly man—nearer seventy than sixty, probably—and even in that assembly he was noticeably ragged and dirty. A drunken old rogue, one would have said from the look of him; the very hue of his nose bore witness to his devotion to the bottle. But he faced the angry glare of the man on the ladder without a tremor.

"So?" the latter said. "Ye seem mighty sure of it, my friend. Mind ye, I don't say you're wrong—but how d'ye know? You're in the duke's service, maybe?"

"I ain't set eyes on him this twenty years," the old man replied. "But I *was* in his service once—time when you and your like were a-servin' of Old Noll. And he was no Papist, you can take it from me. Nor a crop-eared, psalm-singin' ranter, neither," he added pointedly. "He were a good Church and King's man."

The Puritanical one snarled and spat like an angry cat. He was an oddly unpleasant-looking person, that Puritan. His face had a twitch in its muscles on one

side, so that he seemed to be continually sniffing with his right nostril and blinking his right eye. It was a mean, vicious face, dirty-white in color and very seamed and wrinkled, with a thin rat-trap of a mouth and a hooked beak of a nose. But whatever his appearance, the man was shrewd enough. Seeing that the temper of the crowd was turning against him, he changed his tune and had recourse to sarcasm.

"Oho!" he howled. "Step forward, friend. Look round—face the crowd, that all may see you. And you others, note him well. It ain't often we have the intimate of a duke in Golden Harp Alley. Mark you the set of his ears, his cavalier locks, his ruby nose. The sight of them would rejoice the duke's heart, I vow. Look now—I've an idea for ye. The body of this dead rogue has to be taken to the duke. Why not let his friend here be the man to take it? So they meet again, hey?—be united after twenty years."

Throughout all this discussion two men at the back of the crowd had been silently watching the proceedings. Outwardly there was little to distinguish them from the rest of the company. The taller of the pair had the look of a down-at-heels tavern ruffler; his face was unshaven, his gaudy apparel much the worse for wear, and the point of his sword peeped through the end of its scabbard. His companion was a short, thick-set person clad in something between a tattered livery and the garb of a sailor. Under cover of the laughter produced by the Puritanical gentleman's

sallies, the tall man drew the other aside and whispered in his ear.

"That fellow is one of Blood's men, I'll be bound. His talk has a twofold purpose: to discredit his Grace in the eyes of the mob, and to tempt us who are his friends to betray ourselves. Who is he, Ben? Do you know him?"

"I dunno his name, sir, but I've seen him before. In an eating house in Whitefriars, it was. I remember that twitching face of his. Shall I go and ask there—find out about him?"

"Not on your life! You ought to have more sense, Ben. If he's one of Blood's men, you'll learn nothing about him in Whitefriars. And Blood will soon know you've been asking; next time you go there your throat'll be cut. No, there's a better way than that. When this fellow leaves here, you follow him—see? Keep after him as long as you can—all day, if it be possible. Find out where he goes. He might even lead you to Blood's lair, though that's too much to hope for, I suppose. But anyway, follow him. You understand me, Ben?"

"Ay, I understand, sir. Keep him in sight, but don't let him see me."

"That's the idea! Then I'll leave him to you, and be off. You have money?" A guinea surreptitiously changed hands. "I must go and report this to his Grace. Ay, and it will be news for him, too. Paddy Hogan has been with him for twenty years. Lord

God, if I could once get my hands on this hound Blood, I'd . . ."

An hour and a half later the Duke of Ormond, having breakfasted, walked into his receiving room at Clarendon House to attend to the business of the day. Mr. Nathaniel Woodford, his secretary, was already there, sitting quill in hand before a table covered with papers—a precise little fellow with a pale face and a pointed nose, the very pattern of a respectable scrivener. The room partook of the nature of both an office and a lounge. Its paneled walls were hung with maps; on one side was a well-filled book-case, and on another a tapestried curtain hid a row of shelves laden with bundles of documents—letters, dispatches, and accounts, all neatly arranged and bound with red ribbon. But there were also a number of comfortable chairs set round the fire, a couch, and other amenities for the entertainment of visitors.

His Grace was a man of about sixty, tall and robust, handsome of face and clear of eye, and possessed of an upright carriage that many a youngster of half his age might have envied. He was clad in the prevailing mode, in a long, many-buttoned tunic of deer-colored velvet, richly embroidered, and with good lace at the wrists and throat. Everything about him was of the best, but there was none of the exaggeration of fashion, all that vanity of loops and ribands, which was affected by the Court fops. Altogether, it may be said that he made a noble and commanding figure, well worthy of the high name and reputation he bore.

His reputation, to be sure, was unique. No other man in the three kingdoms had such a name for loyalty and honor. A Cavalier of the old school, he had commanded armies for the late king during the Civil War, and had remained faithful to the royal house throughout all its vicissitudes. But that alone would not have won him his good name. There were others who had done as much, and who received no such reward of public esteem. Ormond, however, could do no wrong; his name was a byword, a cult, almost a national institution. With regard to Ireland it had even been made an instrument of policy. And the reason for it lay not in anything that he had achieved, but in the man himself—his personality. He was the product of a more virtuous age, and showed it by his habits of thought and way of life.

Throwing a cheerful greeting to his secretary, the duke sat down at the table and began to turn over the pile of letters that awaited his inspection. Most of them were ordinary communications such as he received every day of the week. My Lady Barradine begged him to use his influence to procure her son a post in the royal household, Sir Thomas Clifford requested the honor of his company at dinner, and Mr. Samuel Pepys sent him the musical score of a song they had been discussing the last time they met. Then came a letter, written in a large, sprawling hand on a dirty sheet of paper, which made him give a snort of indignation.

"His Grace of Ormond was once indebted to Sir John Hallam, of Fulwood Manner near Sheffield in the County of York, for the saving of his life. Sir John Hallam is now dead, and I, Christopher Hallam, his son, am wandering the streets with but a few pence in my pockets, and nothing but the High Toby to save me from starvation. Is his Grace sufficiently concerned to interest himself in my behalf?"

"What, that fellow here again!" the duke said. "Confound his impudence! Let him take to the High Toby and be hanged for it!" And he crushed the letter into a ball and tossed it aside.

His recollections of the late Sir John Hallam were anything but pleasant. He remembered him as a fire-eating Cavalier, brave indeed, but unbelievably reckless and turbulent. On one occasion, upon some totally inadequate pretext—probably manufactured to satisfy a wager—he had forced the duke to fight a duel with him. And not only that; being a remarkably skillful swordsman, he had managed to get the better of it and disarm his Grace. Then, declaring his honor satisfied, he had saluted, sheathed his sword, and swaggered away. Which, presumably, was what his son meant by saying that the duke was "indebted to him for the saving of his life." In spite of his indignation, Ormond could not help smiling.

"Like father, like son," he said. "Go, Woodford,

have a look at this Mr. Christopher Hallam. He professes to be on the point of starvation. If he seems so, give him money—half a dozen guineas."

Mr. Woodford went, and a few minutes later returned, somewhat chastened in manner.

"Well?" his master said.

The secretary coughed. "Er—your Grace—I—"

"Yes? Was he starving? You gave him the money?"

"I offered it to him, your Grace, but—er—he knocked it out of my hand, scattering it on the floor. He said it was not charity he wanted, but honorable employment. He was most violent; if Captain Downing had not been there to restrain him, I vow he'd have done me a mischief. And at the end he bade me go to the devil—or to your Grace, whom he declared was one and the same."

The duke laughed.

"For one dying of starvation he seems a thought vigorous, eh? However, we'll have no more of him. In future he shall be denied the door. You may give orders to that effect, Woodford."

"It shall be done," the secretary murmured thankfully. "Captain Downing was waiting in the anteroom," he added, "and he asked to see your Grace at once."

Ormond's face became grave again.

"Downing?" he said. "At this time? He must have news for me, then. Show him in, Woodford."

The secretary withdrew again, and presently

ushered in Captain Downing. That gentleman was the taller of the pair who had been present at the proceedings in Golden Harp Alley, but a shave and a change of clothes had so altered his appearance that it would have been difficult to recognize him. The duke greeted him eagerly.

"What is it, Downing? You have discovered something?"

The captain shook his head.

"Alas, no, your Grace. Blood has discovered another of us—that is all."

Ormond drew in his breath sharply.

"Another? . . . Who? Tell me, man!"

"Paddy Hogan."

"And he is dead? They have murdered him?"

"His body was hanging in Golden Harp Alley this morning. Golden Harp Alley, off Shoe Lane. Hanging on a barber's pole, your Grace."

The duke rose from his chair, his cheeks very white.

"My God!" he said brokenly. "Paddy Hogan! And he leaves a wife and three children. The fault is mine; I shouldn't have let him go."

He began to pace about the room, and finally came to a halt in front of the window. For a long time he stood there, staring out over his garden, where the leafless trees were tossing in the November blast. But his mind was not on the trees. He looked beyond them, way back into the past.

It was nine years since he had first come into contact with Colonel Blood. During the Civil War

the colonel had served in the Parliamentary Army, and, by favor of the Lord Protector, had acquired for himself an estate confiscated from an Irish royalist. After the Restoration it fell to Ormond as Lord Lieutenant of Ireland to eject him from this estate and restore it to its original owner. From that day forth Blood had pursued him with unrelenting hostility. It might be supposed that the duke, living in Dublin Castle with all the resources of authority at his back, could have laughed at his threats; but events soon proved it to be otherwise. An actual plot to seize the castle was discovered, and though several of the conspirators (including Blood's own brother-in-law) were taken and hanged, the ringleader himself escaped. Thereafter he had lived the life of an outlaw, always plotting, always to be found where strife and turbulence were afoot, and, whenever his path crossed Ormond's, never failing to make his enmity felt.

Of late, since they had both been living in London, a sort of guerrilla warfare had developed between them. Undeterred by the reward of five hundred guineas offered for his head, Blood waylaid and maltreated the duke's servants, tortured them to obtain information about their master, and forced them to bear threats and insolent messages to him. Ormond retaliated by sending men into the byways and alleys of the city by night, in the hope of discovering the monster's lair. But Blood had a genius for disguise and for concealing his tracks, and the almost super-

stitious terror inspired by his name rendered the possibility of betrayal remote. Thus far the only result had been that three of the searchers had met their deaths.

"Curtis, and Halford, and now Paddy Hogan," the duke muttered. "Three of the best men I had." He turned slowly round. "Tell me about it, Downing."

The captain described the scene in Golden Harp Alley.

"Paddy was out on the river last night," he said. "Or that was his purpose when he parted from me. He'd an idea that they have a hulk somewhere—use it for a meeting place. Maybe he found it, and they caught him there. Or maybe the boatman betrayed him—God knows! There was a paper round his neck saying that Blood had killed him, and one of his men was there in the crowd ranting against us."

"And what did you do?"

"What could I do, your Grace? I'd no proof against the man. I left Ben Farrar there to watch him, but it will lead to nothing. He'll give him the slip, sure as fate. They're too dev'lish cunning."

"Ay," the duke groaned. "Cunning—you're right!" He took another turn or two about the room. "See here, Downing," he said suddenly, "this must stop. There must be no more of it."

"Er—no more, your Grace? Of what?"

"Of this hunting of Blood by night. It has cost three men's lives already, and we must stop it."

"But he has sworn to kill you," Downing protested. "'Tis your life or his, your Grace. If we cease from pursuing him—"

"Then let him kill me! I'm getting old, Downing; my life is nearly done. I'd sooner end it here and now than sit and watch my servants die in my place. Is my life more to me than Paddy Hogan's was to him? Or yours to you, Downing? You will be the next to go—or maybe Ben Farrar. You set him to watch that man today, you say. But was it wise? He's not over-intelligent. Can we be sure that he'll ever return?"

The captain looked at him uneasily.

"No, I did wrong," he admitted. "I should have gone after the man myself, and sent Ben here to report to you."

"I don't want either of you to go after him," the duke said. "Nor, from this day forth, after Blood at all. If he kills me—why, then he must. But I'll have no more hunting of him by night. You understand, Downing? Those are my orders."

Downing hesitated a moment, and then inclined his head.

"As your Grace pleases," he said. "But in that case," he went on slowly, "I must—er—I must ask permission to leave your Grace's service."

Ormond showed neither anger nor surprise. He evidently knew what was in the captain's mind, for he stepped forward and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"You're a good fellow, Downing," he said. "You're thinking of Paddy Hogan, eh? He was your best friend. Ay, I know, I know," he sighed. "And if you feel that you must avenge him I can't hold you back. But be careful—for God's sake be careful. It will break my heart if you are taken too."

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## T W O

### *The Conspirators*

HIS Grace of Buckingham sat upright on a three-legged stool and looked about him with distaste. In front of him was a low table, and beyond it a bench disproportionately high, on which were perched his two companions, my Lord Rochester and Sir Charles Sedley. The place was the Blackjack Tavern, in Water Lane, and the time not far short of midnight.

The Blackjack was not a hostelry of great repute. Its situation was against it. Water Lane was within the confines of Whitefriars—the ill-omened Alsatia, headquarters of every thief, bully, and cutthroat in London. And these gentlemen it was, in the main, who frequented the Blackjack. Few honest folk ever went there, and fewer still came out in as good case as they went in. A place darkly and secretively quiet by day, and riotous with strife and contention by night; a place where to show a crown piece or a clean shirt was enough to get a man a knife in his back—such, in the year of grace 1670, was the Blackjack.

For a brief period, however, a few days around the middle of November in that year, it enjoyed a positive blaze of glory. From an unknown ale house it changed suddenly into one of the most popular re-

sorts in Town. The flower of London's rank and fashion crowded through its battered front door—fine gentlemen with swords by their sides, fine ladies even, masked and giggling—to quaff muddy ale in the bar, sip smuggled brandy in the tap room, and polish with their silks and velvets the furniture befouled by the denizens of Alsatia.

The explanation of this seeming marvel is simple. A rumor had arisen, none knew whence, that Mistress Nelly Gwyn, the actress at the King's Theatre, had in her unregenerate days been a serving wench at the Blackjack. One man had it from another; the coffee-houses rang with the tale; Old Rowley himself vouched for the truth of it, so 'twas said. Within that noisome den the matchless Nelly had served pots of ale, sung and danced, while the ruffianly Alsatians, in their tawdry rags and lopsided caps, had sprawled over their filthy tables and swilled their strong liquor, leering at her and swearing in all the lingoes of Babel. It was a thought to fire the imagination, and the matchless Nelly being the toast of the Town, the Town could do no less than toast her in her own home brew.

And where the Town went, there, as a matter of course, went his Grace of Buckingham. Unwillingly, to be sure, most unwillingly. It was the fashion, curse it, and a man needs must. And now, having arrived, he looked about him disparagingly. For that, perhaps, there was some excuse in the Blackjack, but he would

have done so had the place been a palace. It was his way. A sneering, insolent fellow, his Grace of Buckingham, foppishly dressed, and lavishly perfumed and beribboned; handsome, too, in a fair and florid style, though somewhat inclined to stoutness, and by no means so young as he would have had you think.

His two friends amused themselves according to their respective tastes. Rochester, young and volatile, babbled of a woman; Sedley, middle-aged and heavy, sucked morosely at an extinct pipe. They were not alone in the room. About a dozen other gentlemen were there, paying similar tribute to fashion, and sitting in similar discomfort on stool or bench. Among them were a few ladies—vastly amused, it seemed, by the inscriptions and specimens of Alsatian wit that adorned the walls.

"I tell you, Bucks, the creature's exquisite! It's an infernal shame that she should be shut up in that damnable old fortress. For all she sees of life she might as well be one of the prisoners. I'm going to take her out of it."

Thus Rochester. Sedley continued to give attention to his pipe, and Buckingham, against his will, was driven to reply.

"How?" he asked languidly.

"How? . . . How what?"

"Lord above, man!" His Grace waxed peevish. "You've been telling us for the last ten minutes that she's shut up in the Tower. Now you say that you are

going to take her out of it. I ask you how. How does one take people out of the Tower? There are plenty who would give their ears to know."

Sedley removed his pipe from his mouth and grunted.

"Easy," he said, "easy. Child's play to a man of Jack's parts. He drives his carriage into the Tower, pops her inside, and then drives out again. Without a with-your-leave or a by-your-leave—the high hand, d'ye see? Or else he smuggles her out of the Traitors' Gate when no one is looking. Or again, there's disguise. He makes her up as my Lady Castlemaine or the ghost of Old Noll. Or—but damme, I needn't elaborate. Use your imagination, Bucks. What's the Tower to a man like Jack when there's a woman at stake?"

His irony was terrific. He had something of a reputation as a wit to maintain, and there were times when it hung heavily upon him. Rochester tittered politely, but Buckingham yawned and closed his eyes.

"It might be possible," the latter said, "if the wench were willing. But according to your account, she isn't—and her father guards her like a dragon. Who is he, by the way?"

"One Edwards, the keeper of the Crown Jewels," Rochester explained. "Talbot Edwards, an old Cavalier, ruined in the wars. You know the kind—fought at Marston Moor and Naseby, ran away to save his skin, and must be forever telling the history of it.

The last time I was there I listened to him for curst near an hour, and never a sight of the wench did I get. Tchah! Such fellows make me want to crop my ears and turn Anabaptist."

"Ay, I know the breed," Buckingham said sourly. "An old Cavalier, is he? A person of some standing, then?"

"Some kin to the Talbots—a cousin, he says. He had an estate somewhere—some damned dog's hole in the country; I forget where. It was taken from him by Noll's commissioners and has never been restored."

"H'm." The duke yawned a second time. "Well, you have my sympathy, Jack. Such a man should be relieved of his daughter—it is beyond doubt. But I don't see how you're going to do it."

Rochester laughed.

"I'll lay you a level hundred," said he, "that I have her out within a week. There now, will you take me?"

Sedley banged his pipe triumphantly on to the table, smashing it into half a dozen pieces.

"What did I tell you, Bucks? To Jack all things are possible. Well, are you going to take him?"

"Ay, I'll take him," his Grace replied, after a pause. "I'll back my opinion. Why, man, you can't move hand or foot inside the Tower without being scrutinized by the warders. And they'll all know this wench. D'ye think you can bribe them?"

"It would take more than a hundred guineas to do

that," Sedley said. "Or more than a thousand, either. It has been tried too often, and they know their market value."

"Make it a thousand, then, if you're so sure," Rochester chuckled. "It will suit me all right. I account it easy money."

Buckingham stared.

"A thousand, then, plague take you!" he agreed. "But how in the devil's name—See here, though. First I want your assurance—"

He stopped short. Mine Host of the Blackjack, fat Jonathan Bradley, who had been hovering round him for some time, had at last managed to catch his eye. The duke made a gesture of repulsion and held a scented handkerchief to his nose. Jonathan was a singularly unlovely person, as gross and greasy as a bladder of lard.

"Your pardon, my Lord Duke, but the colonel awaits you," he said with an awkward bow.

"The colonel? Then let him wait, confound him! I'll see him later. Bid him wait, I say."

Jonathan seemed not to relish the task. His mouth opened in horrified protest, his fat cheeks quivered, and his eyebrows went up until they threatened to disappear beneath his fringe of dirty gray hair.

"But—but, my Lord," he stammered, "the colonel—he will not—"

It was useless, however. Buckingham waved him impatiently aside and addressed himself to his friends again.

"First I want your assurance as to this, Jack. You have told us the truth about the wench? She is actually inside the Tower?"

"To the best of my knowledge," Rochester averred, "she is there at this moment. She never leaves the place, man; her father won't let her."

"Very good," his Grace said. "Our wager stands, then. A thousand guineas that you have her out within a week from today. You hear, Sedley?"

That gentleman nodded.

"It would be interesting to know how our young friend proposes to set about it," he said.

"Easy," Rochester laughed, "easy! But I have your words, both of you, that you'll not play spoil-sports to my plot."

They signified their agreement.

"Very well," Rochester said, "this will be the way of it. A letter will be delivered one morning to Mr. Talbot Edwards in the Tower. It will purport to have come from the Queen's Chamberlain, and the wording of it will be something after this fashion. Her Majesty the Queen—one can always take the good Catherine's name in vain—Her Majesty the Queen, having heard of the beauty of Mr. Edwards' daughter and of his own distinguished services during the late reign—that'll do the trick, I'll warrant—doth desire the wench to wait upon her, to the end that she may be taken into her service. That same evening a carriage will be sent to the gate of the Tower for her convenience. Which carriage," he added, "will

be mine, and will take her where I want her. You follow me?"

They followed him, doubtless, but neither made any reply. As soon as his lordship ceased speaking, indeed, he discovered that a curious silence had fallen over the whole room. A trifle surprised, he looked around to find the reason for it.

In the middle of the floor a man was standing; a tall, powerfully built personage wrapped in a long, black cloak that descended nearly to his heels, and wearing a broad-leaved hat of the same sable hue. The collar of the cloak was turned up and the brim of the hat pulled low, so that little of his face was visible except the eyes—large, dark eyes that glittered in the candle light. A man, in short, whose appearance was calculatedly horrific, who in the midst of that gaily bedizened crowd of gentlefolk looked as much out of place as a crow in a flock of jays.

Presently the silence was broken. From one of the tables came a laugh, the loud, unrestrained laugh of a man half-drunk. Very deliberately, the unknown turned his head and fixed the laugher with his glittering eyes. The laughter grew shrill, unnatural, and at last died away uneasily. Then one of the women screamed.

Rochester was the first of the gentlemen to recover his power of speech.

"The devil!" he ejaculated. "The devil, or his own twin brother, I vow and declare!"

Then Buckingham started to his feet with an oath. As he did so, the unknown took a step forward and made him a bow.

"You sent for me, my Lord Duke," he said.

"I sent for you?" the duke retorted angrily. "I told you to await me outside, you mean."

The man shrugged his shoulders.

"I waited for ten minutes," he said coolly. "Midnight was the hour we fixed. My time is valuable; I have not your Grace's infinite leisure."

Buckingham gave an indignant snort, but before he could devise a reply Rochester broke in again.

"What the deuce? Is the fellow a friend of yours, Bucks? Present me to him. He's an original, I swear."

The duke swung round on him fiercely.

"Quiet, Jack, for Heaven's sake! He—he's one of my tenants, an old Parliamentarian, a follower of my father-in-law, Fairfax. Pray excuse me awhile—and sit down, I beg of you."

Standing in the doorway behind the stranger's back was Host Jonathan Bradley, and Buckingham beckoned him forward.

"Have you no place where I can see this man in private?" he asked.

"Why, yes, my Lord. If you will but follow me—"

They filed out of the room; Bradley first, carrying a couple of candles, the duke at his heels, very ill at ease, and the unknown stalking impassively in the rear. In this order they traversed a narrow and very

tortuous passage, and finally entered a room at the back of the inn. It was apparently used as a wine-cellar, for barrels were arranged round the walls, and in the middle was a table covered with jugs and bottles. The air was close and heavy, and full of the reek of stale liquor. Buckingham wrinkled up his nose and choked when he reached the threshold, but a touch from the man behind made him step inside quickly enough. Mine Host put down his two candles on the table and then looked round for something on which they might sit.

"You may go," the duke told him. "Close the door behind you, and let me hear your footsteps in the passage. I'll have no listening at the keyhole."

Until he was assured that the man was out of hearing he did not address a word to his companion. Then, "You have the devil's own impudence, my friend," he snapped. "How if I'd denounced you when you forced your way in there?"

"Your Grace would have been exceedingly ill advised. You forget where you are, I think. This is no place to denounce a man. A whistle, a cry for help, the merest whisper of the word 'arrest,' and you'd have all Alsatia about your ears."

"So?" The duke tried hard not to show his discomfiture. "Take off your hat," he ordered. "I'll thank you to uncover in my presence."

The other complied, at the same time throwing back his cloak and revealing the fact that he was

armed with a sword and a brace of heavy pistols. He was certainly a fine figure of a man—tall and long-limbed, straight as an arrow, broad of shoulder and lean of waist. His age was about forty, his face dark and strong, but by no means hard or uncomely. At the moment it was alight with a look of humorous rascality.

"Yours to command, my Lord," he said with a bow. "If it will please you, I'll take off my breeches. Sure, 'tis an honor that you should allow me to wait upon you."

His voice was curiously soft and caressing and had about it a faint, indefinable note of Irishry—not an accent or a brogue, nothing so rude or harsh; but something as intangible, and withal as sweet, as the scent of a flower. It was a voice that women must have found irresistible and Buckingham, who would have given his soul to possess such a one himself, listened to it with hatred and malice.

"It is an honor indeed!" he replied savagely. "A fine stir there'd be if it were known that I was hobnobbing with Colonel Blood."

"A fine stir," the man agreed. "But a yet finer if Colonel Blood were to tell all he knew about you, eh, my Lord? However, let us not bicker, but get to business. Will your Grace be seated?"

He indicated the only chair in the room—one without a back that was apparently used as a footstool by those who had occasion to adjust the wine barrels.

The duke looked at it, and then at the man again. He felt that he would rather stand.

"No—I thank you," he said stiffly.

"As you will," the colonel replied. "'Tis folly to let a good chair go to waste, though—I'll take it myself."

The which he did, settling himself comfortably and crossing his legs, all unconscious, seemingly, of his Grace's glare of indignation and surprise. Having seated himself to his satisfaction, he looked up with a smile.

"Now, my Lord! I asked to see you tonight because I want to talk of our friend—our mutual friend—the Duke of Ormond."

"Ormond? And what about him, pray?"

"He is—well, in effect, he is becoming a nuisance to me. Ever since I returned to Town he has been setting spies on my track. Persistently, my Lord. I've had to hang three of them in the last month. I don't like it—on my word I don't. I'm so hounded and harried that I hardly dare stir abroad."

Buckingham shrugged.

"Dev'lish unpleasant, I should imagine," he said sourly. "But—pardon me—in what way does it concern me?"

"I have decided, my Lord, that the time has come when he must be removed. London is too small to hold the two of us."

"Then remove him! I'm all in favor of it, but I'm

not going to do it for you, my friend. Order one of your rogues to put a bullet through him."

Blood shook his head.

"No, my Lord, no. That wouldn't satisfy me. It's like this, you see. Some years ago the Duke of Ormond hanged my brother-in-law—widowed my only sister. The merest nothing—" he waved his hand deprecatingly—"a trifle, as your Grace will perceive. But I was so foolishly put out about it as to swear an oath that one day I would hang *him*. And that oath, God helping me, I mean to keep. So you see how I'm fixed, my Lord. A shot in the dark or a stab in the back are no good to me. I could have killed Ormond so a score of times. He must hang; nothing less will suffice."

Buckingham stared at him in amazement.

"But, confound it, man, the thing's impossible!" he cried. "Hang Ormond? Why—"

"Impossible? How so? Being a duke doesn't stop a man from hanging. He has a neck the same as any other mortal's. And, think, if he were found on Tyburn Gallows one morning—the great Duke of Ormond—hanging by the neck, stripped naked, and with the innards ripped out of him! How then, my Lord?"

Buckingham stood speechless. He hated Ormond, and he was a man to hate well and truly, but—Lord above!

The enmity between the two noble dukes was well

known and of long standing. On Buckingham's side it was probably due mainly to jealousy. His name was as bad as Ormond's was good; in the popular opinion they represented the opposite poles of good and evil. Even the King was not exempt from this feeling. He might, and often did make Buckingham his boon companion, but he took care not to trust him in matters of state. Nay, more than once he had gone out of his way to deceive him. Of late, the duke had found this out, and the realization had made him yet more bitter against his rival.

"But, Gad save us, it couldn't be done!" he gasped at length. "You talk like a fool, man. How could you get him to Tyburn in the first place?"

"That's where I want your help, my Lord," Blood said. "I want you to keep me acquainted with his movements. You have access to the Court, which I have not. You can learn of his comings and goings beforehand. Do but tell me where he's to be found—more especially of a nighttime, after dark—and the rest you can leave to me. You see, my Lord, I am asking very little of you."

"Only to betray a man to his death," Buckingham said.

"A trifle, my Lord," Blood chuckled. "A trifle to such as you."

"A trifle? Why, it would be the death of me! I should be hanged myself—or sent to the Tower. His Majesty would move heaven and earth to find his murderer."

At that the colonel laughed outright, showing a flash of magnificent white teeth.

"Have no fear, my Lord. Your name shall not appear. I'll take all the credit of the deed upon myself. Would I let another have it, think you—the credit of hanging Ormond? Not while I live! A paper shall be fastened round his neck, saying that he was hanged by me, Colonel Blood. I've done the like before often enough."

Buckingham nodded, and drew a deep breath. He was not a man to give his share of glory to another, but in this case it would be safer—much safer.

"That's all I have to say, my Lord," Blood went on. "Put me in the way of getting hold of him some night after dark, and I guarantee that he shall have a halter around his neck ere morning. There's my offer: take it or leave it, as you will."

He folded his arms and watched the duke smilingly, while his Grace's mouth quivered and his eyes looked all ways. Not that he had any sentimental objection to betraying Ormond—far from it. But he was still torn by fear that it might react disastrously against himself. Once let it become known, and he would be disgraced forever. And Blood might reveal the truth at any moment. It amounted to his putting himself at the man's mercy. In fact, he could see only one way out of it. When the colonel had disposed of Ormond, he in turn must dispose of the colonel. That should not be impossible, he thought, or even difficult. There must be plenty of sturdy Alsatians who

would be ready to put a knife into Blood for the price of a gallon of ale.

"If I do it, will you in return be ready to aid me in other matters?" he asked cunningly.

"I shall always be at your Grace's service," Blood responded.

"We—it cannot be done just now. The Prince of Orange is coming to London, and Ormond will be in attendance on him."

"So much the better. The safer he thinks himself, the more easily will he be taken. Why delay, my Lord? . . . But if you'd have it so, then let us wait awhile. I have an infinity of patience; I've been waiting for this nearly ten years. The longer a vengeance be deferred, the sweeter it grows."

Buckingham shivered a little, in spite of himself. He had thought he was hardened to anything, but cold-blooded villainy such as this was beyond all reason. The charm of the man's appearance and personality—his roguish smile and soft, persuasive voice—only rendered it more horrible. Again his Grace was torn by doubt. Would it be so easy to get rid of the colonel as he supposed? For a long time he hesitated, but in the end he found the prospect of removing the hated Ormond from his path too pleasing to be cast aside.

"We had best wait," he said, "wait until the prince has gone. Or maybe not—I don't know; I'll think on the matter. In any case, so far as I can, I'll do what you ask."

He looked at the man again, and their eyes met—held each other for a moment. Then Blood sprang to his feet with a laugh.

" 'Fore God, my Lord, we are well matched. You're a man after my own heart, I vow. If we can but hold together, there is nothing in this world that we may not achieve. We may even turn the King off his throne—who knows?"

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## THREE

### *In Search of Fortune*

IN the month of June, 1670, Mr. Christopher Hallam, of Fulwood Manor in the County of York, went to London to seek his fortune. He left his ancestral home abruptly, and for reasons over which he had no control. Until his father's death a few days before, no one had supposed that he would have any need to seek a fortune. His future had seemed assured. He would lead the life of a country gentleman; would hunt, shoot, and fish, match his horses against his neighbors', attend cock-fights and badger-baitings, marry and beget children, become a Justice of the Peace and a martyr to gout—and finally, when his time came, be laid to rest in the family vault beneath the gray stone tower of Fulwood Church. To be sure, he was not the heir to the lordship of the Manor, for he had an elder half-brother. But he was so much his father's favorite son that it was universally assumed sufficient provision would be made for him.

And then, all in a moment, this comfortable prospect went by the board. The blow fell when his father's will was read. Sir John died suddenly and unexpectedly. He got wet one day while duck-shooting on the marshes, and took no heed, having been

wet through a hundred times before. A chill seized him, and still he took no notice. The chill developed into pneumonia, but he struggled on, wretchedly ill and furiously angry, cursing the splendid body that never yet had failed him. At last, before the eyes of his grooms, he fell down in the stable yard. He had been trying to mount a horse, with the intention of riding into Sheffield. They carried him to bed, and later in the day he died.

Years before, when his elder son was born, he had made a will. And in the first flush of becoming a father, he had left to that son everything he possessed. After Christopher's birth he had always intended to make a second will, but somehow it had never been done. There was plenty of time, he thought, years and years of it. So that at his death Christopher found himself penniless.

He had never been friendly with his half-brother. For one thing, there was fifteen years' difference between their ages. Christopher was twenty-two, and Robert, the elder brother, thirty-seven. And Robert was a cripple, paralyzed from the waist down. He had not been born so; it was the result of an accident. The carriage in which he and his mother were fleeing from the victorious Roundheads after the battle of Marston Moor had overturned in a ditch in the dark. The lady was picked up dead, and it would have been better, perhaps, if her son had shared her fate. He never walked again, and seldom spent an hour without pain.

Christopher had never knowingly hurt him; following the example of his father, he generally treated him with a sort of kindly contempt. That such an attitude might hurt far more than any words of abuse could have done, he was too young to see. But he knew that his brother did not like him; he had been aware of that ever since he had been old enough to understand anything.

The consequence was that, after his father's death, he felt very much alone in the world. His mother had died years ago, and he had no one to whom to turn for advice. The family lawyer might have helped him, but he was perpetually closeted with Robert. As for the servants, he fancied that they eyed him askance. They all knew the contents of the will and no doubt regarded him as an interloper. Until his father was safely buried he kept out of his brother's sight, but he knew that such a state of affairs could not continue. Sooner or later they must have a reckoning.

It came on the third day after the funeral. One of the grooms brought Christopher a message to the effect that his brother wished to see him in the library. Robert spent most of his time in the library; he might almost be said to live there. Christopher, on the other hand, seldom went into the place. He found the new master of the house sitting in his wheel chair by the window—a thin, bony figure of a man, with a haggard face, worn by years of suffering.

"You asked to see me, Rob?" he said.

"Yes." The invalid sat up a little in his chair. "I want to know what you are going to do."

"To do? . . . Well, it depends on you. I—er—I could manage the place for you."

"Thank you." Robert spoke with some sarcasm. "Odd though it may appear to you, I am going to take the management on my own shoulders. I would suggest that you go to London."

"To London? . . . In God's name, why?"

"Can't you see," Robert demanded violently, "that it is impossible for you to remain here? This house is mine now, every stick and stone of it. I can't have you swaggering round the place, while I sit here in the background like a piece of furniture. Have you no thought for me at all?"

Christopher considered the matter. Yes, he supposed that it *was* impossible, if one looked at it in that way. And for the moment he found it in him to be exceedingly sorry for Robert. But London? It seemed as far away to him as the other end of the world.

"It's a pity I was ever born," he said, "but I couldn't help myself. I am my father's son—*our* father's son. I know you hate me, and I'm sorry—but there it is."

"You are our father's son—yes. I do not forget it. When I die, this place will be yours. I shall never marry, Christopher, and I shan't live long. Already I feel myself growing weaker. Two or three years, or maybe less than that, and I shall be out of your

way. But in the meantime, while I live, you will go away from here. I will make you an allowance, and you will go to London."

Christopher thought again. His impulse of pity passed, and he grew savage and bitter. The man hated him sufficiently to pay him to go away, did he? He was damned if he would accept an allowance under such conditions; rather would he die of starvation!

"Very well," he said, "I'll go to London. I'll go at once—this very day. But you needn't make me an allowance. I won't touch a penny of your money."

Robert stared at him for a moment.

"Very noble," he sneered, "vastly heroic! . . . Don't be a fool, boy. Go to Mander, our lawyer, at his office. I have arranged with him about your allowance. Or if your injured pride stands in your way, wait till you are hungry, and then write to him. The arrangement will still hold good. I don't wish you any ill; I only want to live the last few years of my life in my own way. That's all I have to say to you. Now go!" And he jerked his head toward the door.

Christopher went. In his bedroom were fifty guineas which his father had given him the week before he died. He regarded those as his own and kept them. He also took his horse, his sword and his pistols, and as many of his clothes as he could cram into a valise. With this slender provision he set off on his quest for fame and fortune.

The late Sir John, during his war-time experiences,

had come into contact with various people of rank and fashion. Many of them, to be sure, had died in the meantime, but a number yet survived; and to these, when he arrived in London, Christopher repaired, in the modest hope that one of them would take him into his service. The result—and the only result—was that he spent long and weary hours waiting in their anterooms.

Even that measure of success was not gained without difficulty. The procedure in each case was substantially the same. When Christopher knocked at the door, it was opened—or rather half-opened—by a porter, who placed himself in the gap, like a soldier in a breach, to bar his passage. His inquiry as to whether my lord was at home was met by a surly demand to know his business. At first, in the innocence of his heart, Christopher tried to explain and got the door slammed in his face for his pains. But gradually, after many such rebuffs, he learned wisdom. Instead of embarking on explanations he slipped a shilling into the porter's hand, and asked him as a favor to find out if his lordship was to be seen. Whereupon the janitor would relent and take him indoors to the anteroom.

That, however, was only half the battle. There still remained the business of letting his lordship know that he was there. When he had been kicking his heels in the anteroom for about half an hour, it usually happened that some kind of a superior flunkey appeared. He, in turn, had to be bribed; and whereas

a shilling had done for the porter, this fellow would accept nothing less than a crown.

By dint of expending six shillings, then, Christopher generally managed to get the master of a house apprised of his presence, name, condition, and desire to see him. But that, unfortunately, was no guarantee that the gentleman in question reciprocated his desire. As often as not, he sat waiting in the anteroom half the day, and then was politely bidden to go away and return on the morrow. And if he did return, the whole business of bribery and corruption had to be gone through again.

It was a weary, soul-killing performance, particularly to one whose finances were in so depleted a state as Christopher's. Sometimes, indeed, a gentleman did consent to see him, probably out of curiosity. Nearly everyone whom he solicited remembered Sir John, but usually, alas, in a way best forgotten. So they either dismissed his son with fair words or allowed him to languish in their anterooms unseen.

In the meantime, he employed his leisure exploring London. At first the noise and vastness of it—the crowding carriages, drays, and wagons, the chairs, tumbrils, and handcarts, the bawling prentice-lads and screeching stall-women, the endless roaring of oaths and curses, the abrupt commands to get out of the way—frightened and bewildered him. He soon got over that, but never did he escape from a feeling of loneliness, of being an outsider in the midst of the teeming crowds. Since Fate had sent him to the

place, however, he was determined to see and get to know it. And so he did—from Tower Hill to Tyburn, from the slums of Whitefriars to the spaces of Whitehall.

What interested him above all was the river. He would wander for hours round the Pool, gazing in wonder at the multitude of ships of every size and rig and nation that lay there. The carved figureheads, the towering masts and yards with their spiders' webs of rigging, the clumsy, waddling walk of the sailors, the smell of tar and salt—to a raw landsman who had never before seen a sheet of water wider than the Ouse at Selby, all these things were new.

In the evenings he would enter the sailors' grog-shops and listen to their talk. He heard tales of storm and tempest, of battle and debauch; tales of the brown-skinned rovers of Barbary, of pirate havens in the Caribees, of slave sheds on the Guinea coast; tales of Mogul rajahs who rode on bejeweled elephants, of runaway Cimarrons who ate human flesh and held devil dances in the flower-scented forests of the West.

It was all very good for him, no doubt, in the sense that it broadened his mind and added to his knowledge of the world. But it in no way helped to fill his pockets. By the time he had been in London three months, only two guineas and a few odd shillings and pence remained between him and utter destitution. And he had nothing that he could sell. His horse had gone long ago; all that he possessed now was his sword and the clothes he wore on his

back. Even the treasured pair of silver-mounted pistols that his father had given him when he came of age was in pawn.

It became clear, in fact, that unless he soon obtained employment he would be starving, and obliged to beg his bread. Either that, or he must write to the lawyer in Sheffield and ask for his allowance—confess himself a failure. He thought seriously of taking to the High Toby, but he had to abandon that as impracticable. The first requisites of a highwayman were a horse and a pistol, and he had neither. He might, perhaps, have been able to redeem one of his pistols, but the only way he could get hold of a horse was by stealing it. And horse-stealing, to Christopher, was the lowest crime in the calendar. One might empty a man's pockets, rob him of his wife, kill him even, at a pinch. But steal his horse? No. There were certain things that the Hallams of Fulwood did not do.

As it happened, he was not reduced to the point of starvation. More by good luck than anything else, that crisis was averted. Just when his fortunes were at their lowest ebb, he obtained work—of a sort. And it came, curiously enough, as the result of a tavern brawl.

He spent a great deal of his time in taverns in those days. They were the inevitable resort of one who had nothing to do, and nowhere to go save to the miserable garret where he lodged. But to do him justice, he drank very sparingly, making each tankard

of ale last as long as he could. It happened one evening when he was sitting in the Cock in Fleet Street. A fat, loud-voiced, bullying fellow came in, plumped himself down beside Christopher, and proceeded to entertain the company by holding him to ridicule.

Christopher was in an ill mood that night. It cannot be said that he sought the fight, but he certainly did not go out of his way to avoid it. For one thing, he felt sure of his ability to beat the fellow. And the upshot proved him right. A space was cleared in the middle of the room, and they faced each other sword in hand. For the first minute or so, the man attacked Christopher furiously, and he had much to do to defend himself. Then, as he had expected, his enemy began to tire; he had not the figure for feats of prolonged endurance. Christopher attacked in turn, drove the fellow back, and presently disarmed him. That was all. It was the kind of thing that happened in London a dozen times every night.

When the bully had taken himself off, the other inmates of the tavern crowded round Christopher to offer their congratulations. Among them he noticed one in particular, a short, sturdily built man of middle age—a rather curious-looking man, with a pair of vivid blue eyes that somehow seemed a little out of place in a countenance unusually dark.

"Very prettily done, sir," this person said. "Uncommon prettily, on my word. I don't recall having seen a neater bit of work in years. A clumsier man, now, would have run the fellow through—killed

him, maybe, and had a dead body on his hands, and, like as not, a hue and cry for murder. Yes, sir, you have a way with the sword. Permit me to introduce myself. Pietro Masoni, at your service. Your most humble, sir—devoted."

The man spoke in a stilted, mincing fashion, bowing after every other word. But deep down within his voice, underlying, as it were, all the froth that was cast on top, Christopher fancied he could detect something that was as familiar to him as the nose on his face—the unmistakable accent of a Yorkshireman.

"Your name is Pietro Masoni?" he said doubtfully.  
"A—what, an Italian?"

"An Italian, sir—even so. Pietro Masoni. It is a name not unknown in Town, sir. I have a *salle d'armes* near Lincoln's Inn Fields. And in you, my dear sir, I perceive the product of a rival craftsman. May I presume to ask the name of your fencing master? Caravacioli, is it? Giaconto? De Maupan? But no, not the last—never that beggarly Frenchman."

Christopher was listening to the way the man spoke rather than what he said, but he contrived to make a sensible reply.

"The only fencing master I ever had, sir, was my father. He was a swordsman of some note in his day, I believe. But about yourself, sir. You say you are an Italian. Now, I could have sworn that you were born and bred in England. And I'll wager I can tell you in what part of it. In Yorkshire. Am I right?"

Signor Masoni for a moment was undoubtedly taken aback. Then he looked Christopher full in the face—and winked. Taking the young man by the arm, he led him toward one of the tables.

"Pray be seated, sir," he said. "Do me the favor of joining me in a bottle of Canary and we'll talk on the matter."

During their talk, Christopher learned a number of things. Signor Masoni, as he had guessed, had first seen the light in Yorkshire. In point of fact, he had never been to Italy in his life. His name was Peter Mason, and he had been born at Kingston-upon-Hull, the son of a respectable apothecary there. The doling out of drugs, however, had not appealed to him, and as a means of livelihood he had taken to soldiering and the sword. Now he was the proprietor of a fencing school; and no one could be that, he said, with a name like Mason. It was as necessary for a fencing master to have an Italian name as it was for a valet to have a French one or a parson an English. So he had adopted the style and title of Signor Pietro Masoni, and with it a flowery, affected manner of speech which he conceived to be Italian. Add to that a dash of walnut juice to darken his cheeks, and the thing was done.

The upshot of their talk was that the signor, hearing that Christopher was a fellow Yorkshireman and in dire distress, offered to take him as an assistant in his fencing school. Not, to be sure, at a princely wage; a guinea a week was all that he could afford.

His school was far from being a fashionable one; no person of rank and quality ever went there, and few even of the better citizen class. The clients were mainly the sons of small shopkeepers and the like, callow youths who wished to shine among their fellows by pretending to some skill with the sword. The scale of charges varied according to the paying capacity of the client, but in no case did it exceed a few shillings a lesson.

On the morrow, therefore, a certain Signor Cristofero Alamo appeared as an assistant in the Masoni school of arms. He found his duties there easy enough, and, to a man with a sense of humor, not unpleasant. The chief essential seemed to be to treat the pupils with ridiculously exaggerated politeness. As much time was spent in bowing and scraping, and in the paying of fulsome compliments, as in actual swordplay. Whether those guileless sons of citizens learned much of the art of fencing at the school is to be doubted, but they assuredly must have taken away with them a rare notion of Italian courtesy. Their efforts to reply in kind often moved Christopher to inward mirth.

As to Signor Peter, he soon made up his mind that the man was a rogue. Amiable and good-natured, no doubt, but still a rogue. He often wondered whether the fencing school was not run simply as a cover for something else. Mysteriously people would arrive and mutter to Peter in corners; dark looks would be cast at him, and questions asked. There was one man

who came two or three times a week, an elderly, gray-bearded fellow, with a twitch in his face. He was a ship's chandler, Christopher was told, and his name was Uriah Gaunt—"Uncle Ury" to his intimates. Among the latter, Christopher had no desire to be numbered. Never, he thought, had he seen so false a face on any man, never age so sinister. He said nothing about his feelings, however. It was no affair of his who came to the place.

But whether a rogue or not, Signor Peter was certainly a swordsman. He knew every trick that was in the book, and one or two that were not. And everything he knew, he taught to Christopher. During their spare time, in the intervals of enacting the farce of training pupils, they worked hard and seriously together. At first the advantage was always with the older man, but it grew less so with each succeeding day.

Christopher had a natural aptitude for fencing; he was young and active, and the constant practice improved his speed to a remarkable degree. To the end, perhaps, Signor Peter remained the better swordsman as far as mere technical skill was concerned. But he was not so young as he had been; he needed time to bring his elaborate maneuvers into play. And Christopher, once he knew what to expect, did not give him that time. Before he had been at the school a month, it generally happened that the learner beat the master.

"Ay," Peter said to him one day after a particularly

fierce bout, "you can handle a sword, young man. Mind you, I'm not the man I was, and maybe I'm inclined to overrate you. But if you were to ask me, I'd say there weren't above half a dozen men in London today whom you need fear to face. 'Deed, there's but one whom you need really fear. And he—keep clear of him. Quick as you are, he'd make cats' meat of you inside two minutes."

"And who is he?" Christopher asked.

Signor Peter, it is to be feared, had an unguarded moment.

"Colonel Blood," he said.

Christopher turned round and looked at him.

"Colonel Blood? Why, what do you know of *him*?"

Peter shook his head and averted his eyes.

"If I told you that, my lad," said he, "it would be the last thing I should live to tell, or you to hear. Let it be."

And not another word could Christopher get out of him.

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## F O U R

### *My Lord Rochester*

BY exercising the most rigid economy, Christopher found that he was able to live on his guinea a week—just live on it, and no more. For more than two months, therefore, he drank nothing more expensive than beer, took his meals in the cheapest of eating houses, and slept at night in his garret. It was a doleful existence for the heir to Fulwood Manor, but as things were, he could do nothing else.

In the meantime, he continued his importunities at the doors of the hard-hearted noblemen. His means no longer allowed him to bribe his way into their anterooms, but the resourceful Peter had suggested a less expensive mode of operation. It consisted of composing a letter to the master of the house, delivering it at his door in person, and gruffly informing the porter that he was coming inside to await an answer. The written word, he found, had great weight with porters, and he was generally able to reach the anteroom without spending a penny. True, the ultimate result was always the same—he was sent away empty. But it was something to feel that he was not out of pocket by the process.

It was during this period that he paid his visit to

the Duke of Ormond. Afterwards he bitterly regretted not having taken the money which his Grace's secretary had offered him. Six guineas, it had been; as much as he would earn at the fencing school in six weeks. Why hadn't he put his cursed pride in his pocket? And why—confound their insolence!—hadn't they offered him the money privately, instead of in the Duke's anteroom with half a score of people looking on?

Three days after his stormy interview with Ormond's secretary, however, his luck changed—or seemed to change. It occurred to him to try my Lord Rochester. He had never seen that young man, but he believed their fathers had met once or twice during the war. He wrote a letter describing an imaginary friendship between them, with details of a life-saving in a battle thrown in to give credibility. This he handed in at his lordship's door, and, as usual, stationed himself in the anteroom to await results.

They were not long in coming. Before he had been in the anteroom five minutes, a servant appeared and asked him to step into the library, where, he said, my Lord would presently join him. Christopher was delighted beyond measure. No such thing had ever happened to him before. The anteroom was full of people, and he had been chosen before them all! Most of the others, probably, were tradesmen's debt collectors, but he was not to know that.

He looked round the library with interest. It was unlike any other library that he had ever seen. In-

stead of the usual bookcases, its walls were adorned with paintings, beautifully executed indeed, but of a kind which made the country-bred Christopher fairly open his eyes. What books there were seemed mainly to be piled on the table, together with a heterogeneous mass of other articles—letters, bundles of manuscript, writing materials, musical instruments, bottles and glasses, and clothing, both male and female. The same confusion extended all over the room; every chair was occupied, and Christopher looked in vain for a place on which to sit.

He was still standing uneasily in the middle of the floor when his lordship came in. Though the time was nearly midday, he seemed to have only just got out of bed. He was wearing an embroidered French dressing gown; his face was unpowdered, and in the strong morning light it showed unmistakable signs of dissipation and premature decay. He greeted Christopher with an airy wave of his hand.

"Your servant, fair sir" he said. "Be seated—be seated, I pray," and he swept a pile of books and papers off one of the chairs on to the floor. "You're the man I've been looking for this last twenty years. The man who saved my father's life at Naseby! Mr.—er—curse me, what's your name again?"

"Hallam, my Lord," Christopher bowed. He was a trifle surprised at the warmth of his welcome; but perhaps, after all, someone *had* saved his lordship's father's life at Naseby. There was no telling.

"Hallam, to be sure! And you saved my father's

life at Naseby! Well, well! If you but knew, my dear sir, how I have longed for this moment. For you to come forward and—”

“No, my Lord,” Christopher hastened to say, “it was not I myself who did it, but my father. I am not of an age; I wasn’t born at the time.”

“So?” His lordship seemed disappointed. “Fie, sir,” said he. “Fie and tush! You are too modest, I fear. However, let us say your father. His gallant sword, his stout right arm, eh? But you are still standing, sir. Sit down and tell me about it.”

“It was in the last charge of Rupert’s horse,” Christopher improvised. “Your lordship’s father, as I understand, was dismounted and thrown to the ground, and two of Noll’s troopers made at him to trample him under foot. My father, who by good fortune was close at hand, held them off until his lordship had regained his feet. And then—”

“Don’t tell me,” Rochester interrupted. “Don’t tell me; I know! My father clapped yours on the back, or maybe wrung him by the hand, and said to him, ‘Friend, you have saved my life. Henceforth we are as brothers; everything I have is yours.’ Wasn’t that the way of it?”

Christopher stared. He began to suspect that he was being made a fool of.

“I was not told that your father said any such thing, my Lord,” he said stiffly.

“Eh? He didn’t? Then it was most dev’lish remiss

of him. He said it when his life was saved at Marston Moor, and again when it was saved at Worcester. And in the matter at Bristol too, and when he escaped hanging near Newbury. But not in this case, you say—not to your father. Dear, dear! What did he say, then?"

"He said nothing, my Lord. They were in the middle of a battle, and there was need of deeds, not words."

Rochester nodded appreciatively.

"That's good," he said, "very good. I begin to conceive an admiration for you, Mr.—er—"

"For me, my Lord? Why?"

"You have a way with you, unmistakably. Such modesty, such an honest, forthright look, such a nice sense of what to leave unsaid. I doubt if I could have told the story better myself, and I have something of a reputation as a liar, believe me."

"My Lord!" Christopher sprang to his feet, highly indignant, his hand fumbling for the hilt of his sword.

"Better and better!" his lordship laughed. "On my soul, you do it with the most natural air in the world! Almost you persuade me that your story is true. If my father had been at Naseby, I couldn't have doubted it. But he wasn't, you see; he was a matter of five hundred miles away, and overseas—in Paris, to wit. That does stick in my gullet a trifle, I'm free to confess. However—" he waved his hand deprecatingly—

"let it pass. Suppose he had been there and your father had saved him, what then? What would you have asked of me?"

Christopher stood silent a moment, a variety of expressions chasing one another across his face—shame, anger, surprise, and finally amusement.

"Your lordship is too kind," he said.

"Kind, my dear sir? Nothing of the sort! Wait till you know me. But I think a man with your gifts should be encouraged; I like a good liar. So what's your trouble? Silver and gold have I none, but I'll willingly serve you in any way I can. In the expectation, mark me, of a like willingness on your part should the occasion arise."

"Certainly, my Lord."

"Then pray, state your wishes."

At last Christopher had what he had been waiting for so long—an actual nobleman before him, not only alive and in the flesh, but ready to listen to him sympathetically. And he made the most of it, describing all that had happened from the time that his father died until that moment.

"On my word," Rochester said when the recital was over, "on my word, sir, you wring my withers. I don't know whether your story be true, but the way you tell it would bring tears to the eyes of a codfish. But—pardon me—what do you want me to do about it?"

"Well," Christopher said doubtfully, "could you

speak for me to the King, my Lord?" He thought he might as well strike at the fountainhead. The circumstances seemed favorable, and he was never likely to get such a chance again. "My father served in the war up to the bitter end, and that should constitute some claim on His Majesty's gratitude and sense of justice."

To his surprise, his lordship threw back his head and laughed.

"Ho, hol Ha, ha! . . . Oh, Gad save me—His Majesty's *what?* His gratitude and sense of justice! My dear Mr.—Hallam, is it?—my dear Mr. Hallam, you have no need to tell me that you are newly come to Town. That much of your story is true, anyway. Else you would know that His Majesty *has* no sense of justice. None, believe me! What is it, do you think, that has brought myself into favor? Not that my father was a staunch old Royalist who made it his business to fear God and honor the King; but that he happened to have a graceless dog of a son who does neither, though he can drink, wench, and gamble with any man in London. And that is the truth. His Majesty's sense of justice, tchah! As to his gratitude—yes, there you have more hope. That may be won. Have you, by any chance, a pretty sister?"

Christopher said that he had not.

"Or a cousin, or a niece, or even an aunt? Any one of them, if only she be pretty, could win His Majesty's gratitude in a night. But you have none?"

No? That's bad. It means you'll have to stand or fall by your own merits. And what qualities have you that will be acceptable to him?"

Christopher could think of none save that he was a better than average swordsman.

"No use," Rochester said, shaking his head. "There are plenty of good swordsmen in London—too many. Have you no parlor tricks? Can you play anything? The guitar, say, or the flageolet? Or chess, or tennis? Or cards, ombre and basset? Or even the fool, like your humble servant? Dear, dear—nothing? Can you dance, then, or balance on a tightrope, or sing a filthy song, or coin a profane epigram?"

With great regret, Christopher confessed his inability to perform any of these requisites for royal favor.

"Then what am I to do with you?" his lordship asked. "Curse me if I know. Unless—see here: you might make a friend of one of the royal whores. The Castlemaine, say, or Nelly Gwyn. Ay, why not? You're a well-grown fellow, and of good appearance. I've known worse to succeed. Try Nelly Gwyn—I'll present you to her. If she takes a fancy to you, your fortune's made. And she has a weakness for out-at-elbows lovers, having known poverty herself."

At that it was Christopher's turn to laugh. He had imagined himself climbing to fortune in many different ways, but never beneath the skirts of another man's mistress.

"You won't do it?" Rochester said. "Then I fear

me your case is hopeless. Hopeless, sir, you can take it from me."

"Your lordship can do nothing at all?"

"With His Majesty, nothing. If you're a swordsman—a real swordsman—I might mention your name to Buckingham. He was saying one day that he had need of a man who could handle a sword and hold his tongue. But I warn you, it will be no child's play. You'll very likely get your throat cut. He has some dev'lish queer friends, has Bucks."

Christopher nodded. The Duke of Buckingham was about the last man whom he would have chosen to serve, but any kind of service was better than his present mode of living.

"I shall be most grateful, my Lord," he said. "Anything I can do—"

"Tush, man!" His lordship waved a disclamatory hand. "Don't affect gratitude, I pray. I'm not going to do it for love of you. I despise a man who is influenced by anything but motives of self-interest. Believe me, I shan't stir hand or foot in the matter until I have had my *quid pro quo*. There, sir! Few men would speak so plainly, but then few are as honest as I."

"I see," Christopher said—and left it at that. "What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"I want you to assist me by carrying off a lady."

Christopher sat up with a jerk. "Carrying off a lady?"

"Precisely! A certain Mistress Edwards—a great

beauty, and an heiress with God knows how many pounds to her name."

"And you mean to carry her off by force?"

"I mean you to do it for me, my dear sir. You appear as a very *deus ex machina*. Until your arrival I was in despair. The trouble is, I have another engagement, and one that I wouldn't break for any woman in Christendom. I had to find a man to take my place—and lo, he appears."

"But you can't ask me to use force on a woman, my Lord."

"Tut, tut! No more than she is herself willing to encounter, man. Have no fear; it is all arranged. I've been paying court to the creature for months. But her father, a stiff-necked old Cavalier, entertains the strange conceit that I am not sufficiently moral and righteous to make a good husband. Odd, eh? I've quoted him the adage about the reformed rake, too. However, happily the damsel herself does not share his delusion. Wherefore she has consented to elope with me. And a certain display of force, if you take me, will save appearances on her side."

Christopher knew not what to think. The lady might be a beauty and an heiress, but her foolishness seemed to pass all bounds.

"What do you want me to do with her?" he asked.

"I tell you, dear sir, it is all arranged. At five o'clock this evening she will be traveling through the city in a carriage. Three of my men will be with

her, and I want you to provide yourself with a stout horse and go to meet them at—where shall I say?—the Triumph Tavern at Charing Cross. To make sure of getting the right carriage, ask for one Taprell. All I want you to do is to take her out when she reaches her destination. And I warn you not to be deceived should she make a show of resistance. She doesn't want to have her father disinherit her."

"And where is the carriage going, my Lord?"

"To a house near Ealing. My fellows will take you there; they have their orders. Upon arriving, you open the door of the carriage, make excuses for my absence, and drag her out. Then you escort her into the house, where two ladies will be waiting to receive her. *Voilà tout.* I only ask you to be present because I don't want the nymph mishandled by serving men and varlets. Now, sir, do you consent?"

Christopher hesitated. The task was not at all to his liking, and he was by no means certain that he had been told the whole truth about it. But he had little choice in the matter. If he refused to do what was asked, then most assuredly he would get no help at all from my Lord Rochester.

"Very well, my Lord, I'll do it," he said. "And you, in return, will perform your part of the bargain?"

"On my soul and honor!" Rochester averred, laying a hand on his heart. "Call here tomorrow morning, and I'll take you to Buckingham myself. I shall

do it the more willingly," he added, "because he will then be a thousand guineas in my debt. Ha, ha, ha! . . ."

At about the same time that Christopher was closeted with my Lord Rochester, Mr. Talbot Edwards, the Keeper of the Crown Jewels in the Tower of London, was seated in an upper room of the Martin Tower and engaged in the congenial occupation of raging at his wife.

He was a man of many grievances, Mr. Talbot Edwards. Chief among them was the loss of his estate, the land which he had inherited from his forefathers. Like so many Royalist estates, it was confiscated after the Civil War by the emissaries of Cromwell. That he could have endured—or, at all events, he said he could. What rankled in him was the fact that it had not been given back to him after the Restoration. Its Puritan possessor was allowed to retain it, and he, who had shed his blood for the King, had to make shift to earn a living as a turnkey in the Tower. To be sure, this monstrous injustice was in no sense the fault of his wife, but being the only person whom he could oblige to listen to him, she generally had to bear the brunt of his spleen.

On this occasion, however, his wrath was concerned with something else. It had reference to a letter which had arrived that morning—a letter from the Queen's Chamberlain, no less, from the terms of which it appeared that Her Majesty wished to see

Mr. Edwards' daughter. The poor gentleman was almost beside himself. Had his own presence been desired, he could have understood it. That the Queen should wish to see Mr. Talbot Edwards was only right and proper. But to send for his daughter—a chit of a girl barely out of her teens—without even asking him to accompany her! It was unthinkable; it made him doubt the authenticity of the letter.

"Will you speak, woman?" he shrieked. "For the Lord's sake, speak! The good God gave you a tongue in your head, didn't he—that it might not be altogether empty?"

His wife sighed. She was a woman of over fifty, gray-haired and withered, and somewhat bowed as to the shoulders, too, by years of hard work. Yet there still clung to her a certain air of grace and distinction, a lingering fragrance, as it were, of the beauty that had once been hers. In her youth she had been the toast of a county, and the discerning eye might know it even now.

"What do you wish me to say?" she asked.

"I want you to answer my question. How can Her Majesty have heard of the girl? How can she know of her existence? Tell me that!"

"I can't tell you," the lady said. "I don't know how."

"You don't know? No, madam, nor anyone else. Nor anyone else, I say! She can't have heard of the girl; it's flatly impossible." Mr. Edwards glared round the room. "Where is she? Where is the wench?"

"In her bedroom, sewing. Finishing off her dress, since you won't allow her to do it here."

"Her dress? Devil take the girl, I told her she wasn't to go! I told her to throw the dress on the fire. Does she think she's going in spite of me? And you, woman, would you aid and abet her? By thunder, I'll show you who's master!" He started to his feet, a thin, elderly, rather pathetic figure of a man, white and shaking with rage. "In her bedroom, is she? I'll have the silly wench out! I'll—"

At that moment there came from below stairs the jangle of a cracked bell. Mr. Edwards paused, and his wife gave a fluttering sigh of relief. The ringing of that bell was a signal that the presence of the keeper of the jewels was required below. It probably meant that someone wanted to see the crown. As one of the perquisites of his office, Mr. Edwards was allowed to conduct selected people into the jewel room and let them feast their eyes upon its treasures—from a respectful distance, of course. The fees which he exacted for this privilege, indeed, formed the major part of his income.

On hearing the bell he gave a muttered curse, and for a moment stood hesitating. But money was too short with him to permit of its being thrown away, so at last he turned round and shuffled off downstairs, promising over his shoulder to deal with his recalcitrant daughter later.

He was no sooner out of sight than that young lady appeared, bringing with her the dress that

should have been thrown on the fire. She was an uncommonly attractive looking girl; no mere picture-book beauty, but something more. Her face was too broad for classical requirements, too strongly featured, perhaps; but it sparkled with life and character. It was a face which some men might not like, but which would, nonetheless, live longer in their memories than those of a dozen golden-haired languishers and mincers. How poor, feckless Mr. Talbot Edwards had begotten such a daughter was a mystery—not least to the daughter herself.

"Has he gone?" she asked in a whisper. "Oh, praise Heaven! I heard the bell, but I thought it too good to be true."

"S-sh!" Her mother pursed her lips reprovingly. "Nancy, my dear, you must not say such things. Your poor father, he was not always so. I remember when—"

But Nancy interrupted her impatiently.

"Yes, yes, Mother, I know! But he's always so now, isn't he? If he goes on much longer I shall scream. Let's hope there's someone down below who'll keep him in talk for a while. Look, Mother!" She spread out the dress on the table. "This frill—"

For some time the conversation was entirely of dressmaking technicalities. The garment which was being altered was not Nancy's own, but one that had been given her for the occasion by my Lady Robinson, the wife of the Lieutenant of the Tower. The gift was no doubt kindly meant; but my lady, un-

fortunately, was not only taller than Nancy, but some fifteen years older and of correspondingly greater circumference. Therefore the amount of alteration required was considerable. For about five minutes they were able to labor at it undisturbed; then Mr. Edwards burst in again, charged with a fresh grievance.

"There's a parson down below with his wife," he said, "and the woman has been taken ill. The heat it is, or the cold—God knows what. Anyway, there she is. I can't have her lying in a fit on the floor of the jewel room; she must come up here. Clear away all this!" He hurled Nancy's dress one way and her sewing basket the other. "Don't stand staring, child; clear it up and go to the cupboard for the cordial."

By the time the two ladies had picked up the contents of the sewing basket the parson appeared, carrying his wife in his arms. So long as she remained there she kept comparatively still, but when he set her down in an armchair she was seized with the most alarming convulsions. She writhed to and fro in an incredible manner, bending her limbs back under her and assuming attitudes that it would seem impossible for the human body to attain and yet remain whole. Her face, in the meantime, was horribly distorted, and she mouthed a heavy white froth.

Mr. Edwards retired to a safe distance and cursed; the parson hopped round the room wringing his hands, alternately calling upon God and begging his wife to speak to him; Mrs. Edwards shrank back

against the table and covered her face with an apron. It was left to Nancy to hold the wretched woman down and keep her from falling off the chair. Gradually the sufferer's contortions grew less frequent, and at last, after a final spasmotic twist that seemed worse than any which had gone before, she lay still. At the same time her ravaged face miraculously straightened itself out, revealing her to be a woman in the early thirties—and, curiously enough, a not unpleasant-looking woman. So soon as she ceased to struggle, her husband came forward and began to chafe her hands.

"There, there, my dear!" he said comfortingly. "You feel better now, don't you? . . . Don't you, my darling?—Tell me . . . . Oh!" He turned to Nancy in despair. "She still won't speak to me. What are we to do—what are we to do?"

"We might wipe her mouth and give her a drop of cordial," Nancy suggested practically. "Will you do it, sir, or shall I?"

In the end she did it herself, the parson's effort to help her having resulted in his knocking over the bottle. The patient drained the cup that was held to her lips at a gulp, and straightway began to splutter and gasp for breath. The spirits seemed to have the desired effect, however, for presently she sat up and looked round bewilderedly.

"Sit still, my love," her husband admonished. "You are among friends; sit still and rest yourself."

The lady sank back with a sigh, but a moment later she raised her eyes to Nancy's and smiled.

"I am truly sorry to have troubled you so," she said faintly. "I—it was foolish of me. I don't know what—"

"Nay, the fault was mine," the parson interposed. "You won't hold it against her, madam, I beg. I knew how it would be before we came here; I felt it in my bones. My poor wife has had these attacks from childhood. Above all, she can't abide being shut in; that always upsets her. And this Tower, on my word, it is enough to try the nerves of the strongest. The—the—I hardly know what to call it—the atmosphere of the place, the thought of those who have died here, the gray stone walls and the dark, sinister look of it. I did wrong to bring her here—but you know how it is with a woman, madam. She wanted to see the crown, and I hadn't the heart to say her nay. Against my better judgment I yielded, and now . . ."

He talked on and on, while Nancy looked at him with faint distaste. His voice was full and unctuous—a very parsonical voice, that might soothe or irritate according to the hearer's taste. In Nancy's case it irritated; she thought the man had too good an opinion of himself. And his appearance strengthened that impression. He was a big man of about fifty, tall and well built, with a carefully tended gray beard and a pair of fine dark eyes overhung by bushy brows. He wore a full-bottomed wig, the whitest of bands and linen, and the blackest and glossiest of clerical clothes. Altogether, except that he had run less to

fat than most, he was a choice specimen of the fashionable parson, and she wondered that he had not attained to a bishopric.

Presently, when he turned to make renewed apologies to her mother, Nancy took the opportunity to slip away. Her precious dress was lying bundled up on a chair, and she was anxious to get it out of the room before anyone sat on it. The moment seemed favorable; her father was out of sight—gone to lock up the jewel room, she supposed—and since the lady had recovered, her ministrations would no longer be needed. So she quietly made her escape, closing the door behind her.

When she returned, about a quarter of an hour later, an atmosphere of peace and friendliness prevailed. The lady was sitting up and talking to her mother, and at the other end of the room, her father was listening to the parson's flow of words. Nancy was duly presented to the strangers, and learned that the parson's name was Andrews—the Reverend Thomas Andrews, a Doctor of Divinity and the Vicar of St. Alphege's Church in some street, the name of which she did not catch. And the subject of the discussion between him and her father, she found, was the letter that had arrived from the Queen's Chamberlain.

"I think the young lady ought to go—most decidedly, sir," the parson boomed. "You say the letter is a forgery, but what's to prove it? I ask you—what? On the face of it—" he slapped his hand on the let-

ter—"it is genuine enough. And if it be genuine—why, you'd be very unwise to offend Her Majesty. There can be no two opinions about that."

"No," Mr. Edwards said nervously, "no. We should be turned out of here, most likely—out of this rat hole, our last refuge."

"Then why not let her go?"

"But who is to take her there?" the harassed father asked. "She can't go through the streets unescorted. And who is to present her to Her Majesty? I can't do it myself; my duty keeps me in the Tower. Besides," he added bitterly, "I am not asked to be present. They don't want me."

At this point Nancy caught the parson's eye, and smiled. She still thought him a posturing ass, but he was influencing her father in the right direction, and deserved to be encouraged. She could see that he was aware of her byplay, but he allowed no sign of it to appear on his face.

"Ay, I take your meaning," he said gravely. "The position is not without difficulty. But I still think that she ought to go. As to who will present her to the Queen, that I can't say. But there's no need for you to worry about her safety. I'll attend to that myself—keep watch on her carriage from a distance. And, in case anything happens, I'll bring with me three stout fellows who . . ."

Nancy began to see that her judgment had gone astray. The man was not quite so devoid of good sense as he appeared.

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## F I V E

### *The Abduction*

AT five o'clock that evening, in accordance with his promise to my Lord Rochester, Christopher took up his stand outside the Triumph Tavern, near Charing Cross, to await the carriage containing the runaway lady. It cannot be said that he went with a good heart. There was too much about the affair that was left unexplained. The actual elopement, he supposed, would have taken place before he arrived on the scene; else how could his lordship's men have charge of the carriage? But if so, why should the lady make a difficulty about getting out of it? For appearance's sake, Rochester had said; but who would be there to see? Not her father, surely, or anyone else whom it was necessary to deceive.

"It's the most nonsensical business I ever heard of!" he said to himself. "What a heaven-born fool the woman must be! If she makes too much of a fuss, the jade, I'll have her out by the scruff of the neck. That's about what she deserves."

It was almost dark when he reached the rendezvous, exceedingly cold and pouring. It would be, he thought morosely; that alone was needed to add the final touch of unpleasantness to the proceedings. The

inclemency of the weather had the advantage, however, of making the streets less crowded. There were so few carriages abroad that he was unlikely to accost the wrong one. Taprell, he remembered, was the name of the person for whom he must inquire, and Edwards that of the lady.

He had been waiting for about twenty minutes when the carriage came along. Two others had passed him in the meantime—gentlemen's equipages surrounded by throngs of liveried footmen, too magnificent to be what he wanted. The third in comparison had an almost hang-dog appearance. No armorial bearings adorned its panels, and the solitary individual who walked in front carrying a torch wore no recognizable livery. As it lumbered past he discovered that there was a second man following, and to him he addressed himself.

"Mr. Taprell?" he said.

The man sprang abruptly back, and his hand darted down inside his cloak.

"Ay, that's my name," he growled. "Who are you? Stand back, friend, stand back! What's your game?"

"I am come from my Lord Rochester. He is engaged this evening and has asked me to take his place. This carriage, as I understand, is going to a house near Ealing. I am to accompany it thither and see the lady safely disposed in the house."

"Hugh!" Mr. Taprell seemed doubtful. "So his lordship ain't comin'. Engaged, ye say? He's scared o' the wet takin' the curl out of his wig, more like.

Very well, mister, see here, then. We takes the doxy to this house and no further. That's what we're paid for, and it's all we're doin'. Soon as we come to the house, out she gets, no matter what. After that she can go to the devil—and you likewise, mister. See?"

Christopher decided that he did not like Mr. Taprell. But it would be manifestly impolitic to start a brawl, more particularly as he saw that the man was clutching a huge horse-pistol. The lady in the carriage would be frightened out of her wits, if nothing worse happened.

"Let us go on," he said quietly. "When we reach the house I'll take her off your hands—that's understood."

They went on—in the direction of Ealing, he supposed, though he was not familiar enough with the way to be sure of it on such a night. He was aware, however, that they were gradually leaving the town behind. The houses on either side grew fewer and farther between, the ground under foot grew softer, until at last they were traveling along a fair semblance of a country lane. In the meantime, he tried to engage Mr. Taprell in conversation, but that gentleman had said his say and now chose to be silent. The others, the driver and the footman in front, were no more communicative. How any man could entrust the woman he intended to marry to three such surly, ill-conditioned rogues passed Christopher's comprehension.

Once or twice he walked round the carriage and

tried to get a glimpse of the lady. It was useless, however; he could see nothing at all in the dark interior. For a while he remained by the door in the hope of her opening it and speaking to him, but no such thing happened. Finally, he settled down to walk in front, about a dozen yards ahead of the man with the torch. He was plodding along thus, deep in thought, with his head bent against the driving rain, when he heard a shout from Mr. Taprell.

"Here we are, mister. Yonder's the house—'midst the trees, see. We're right in front of the gate. Now it's your turn. Out with her!"

Christopher looked round, and beheld by the light of the footman's torch a narrow iron gate flanked by two stone pillars. Beyond was a dark mass of trees, through which he could see afar off the twinkle of a light.

"We can't get the carriage through that gate," Taprell said. "She'll have to walk it."

Christopher squared his shoulders and approached the carriage door. With his fingers on the handle he hesitated. It had been all very well to talk of taking the lady by the scruff of the neck, but now that the time had come when he might have to do it, his heart was in his boots. He was still standing there, irresolute, when the door was opened from within and a feminine voice addressed him.

"What do you want, sir? Do, pray, let us get on; I am nearly frozen. How much further have we to go?"

"No further," he said. "We are there now, madam. The house is before you, among the trees."

There was a pause, during which he was aware of the lady peering round into the gloom.

"But it is impossible," she said at last. "This can't be the place. There must be some mistake." Then her voice took on a note of alarm. "Who are you, sir?"

"My name is Hallam—Christopher Hallam. His lordship was—er—most unfortunately prevented from being here, and he asked me to take his place. If you'll allow me, I'll escort you to the house. You are expected there, madam."

It sounded to him an exceedingly lame tale, but even so he was hardly prepared for the effect it had on the lady.

"His Lordship?" she gasped. "Who? What do you mean—his lordship? . . . Speak, man!"

"My Lord Rochester, madam. It was he who sent me here."

"My Lord Rochester?" she said in a horrified whisper. "Is he at the bottom of this? Then it was all false—that letter—my father was right. Oh, dear God!"

Christopher knew not what to think.

"I—he asked me to meet you here and take you to the house, madam. I understood that it was an elopement—that you were to be married. Is it possible that you were not a party to the arrangement?"

"A party to it?" she said. "I don't know the man;

I've only set eyes on him two or three times." Then her fear disappeared in a blaze of anger. "Oh, you—you creature!"—and she struck him in the face. "Get out of my way! Stand aside this instant!"

She thrust him back, sprang out of the door, and would have run past him and away into the darkness had he not seized her by the wrist.

"Madam, be reasonable, I beg of you!" he implored. "If you didn't consent to this, how is it that you are in his lordship's carriage?"

"Because I was deceived. He lied to me—a false letter. Oh, release me, will you—let me go!"

She struck at him again—a blow on the nose this time, hard enough to bring the tears to his eyes. He heard the laughter of Mr. Taprell and his fellows; heard, too, sounds which told him that the carriage was on the move again, leaving them. And then he, in his turn, lost his temper. He dragged the girl toward him, striving to capture her other wrist. She fought him like a wildcat; he felt her nails against his cheek and her knuckles upon his mouth; but at last he pinioned her arms behind her and had her helpless.

"Now," he said harshly, "you are going to answer me one or two questions. You were taken from your home under false pretenses. Is that your story?"

"Yes!"

Christopher gritted his teeth. He would have something unpleasant to say to my Lord Rochester the next time they met! But that would keep; the press-

ing necessity was to dispose of this raging fury. What was he to do with her? The easiest thing would have been to let her run away, but somehow that did not commend itself to him. After all, she was a woman, and he was, in a sense, responsible for her plight. Lord knew what might happen to her if she went wandering off alone in the dark.

"Where is your home?" he asked presently.

"In the Tower."

"The tower? What tower?"

"Oh—the Tower of London! Don't you know what that is, fool? . . . Is there anything more you wish to ask me? If not, let me go."

"Go where, madam?"

"Anywhere," she said fiercely, "so long as I can be free of you."

Christopher tried to collect his wits. The Tower was four or five miles away at least, probably more than that. It was unthinkable that she should be allowed to go there alone.

"Come, then," he said in a voice that he tried to make encouraging, "we'll go to the Tower. Will you let me take you there?"

"No," she cried wildly, "I will not! I won't stir a step in your company—I'd die first! Oh, if only I were a man I'd kill you!"

And she began to struggle again, with so desperate a strength that he had much ado to hold her. They swayed to and fro about the roadway, and once Christopher tripped over some unseen obstacle and all but

fell headlong. But at last, with a sort of sobbing gasp, she relaxed and stood still. Her shoulders were shaking, and he had an idea that she was in tears.

"Have I—have I hurt you?" he asked, stricken with a tardy sense of shame.

"No—oh, no! Only bruised me from head to foot."

Trembling though she was, her answer came back sharp and fierce; and Christopher, realizing the effort that it must have cost her to make it, was lost in admiration of her courage. Most women in her case would have wept and implored, but from her had come never a cry, never a plea. She was a young woman, too—young and attractive; the feel of her told him that. He suddenly became conscious of her face a few inches from his own, and of the faint perfume of her hair.

"Lord," he groaned, "if only you would believe me! I know nothing of my Lord Rochester; until today I never saw him. I mean you no harm, madam—I swear it! Can't you trust me?"

"Trust you? To be sure, I do!" Her voice was icy with contempt. "An avowed procurer of women for the most notorious rake in London—who would not trust you? Pah!" She almost spat at him. "You pitiful creature! A man who would take me for himself I could understand, even though I might hate him. But you, who try to steal me for another . . ."

Christopher stood silent, writhing under the lash of her tongue. He knew that appearances were against him, but surely, after all that he had said, she might

have given him the benefit of the doubt. What was he to do with her? Take her at her word, and let her go? There seemed nothing else for it. They could not stand here wrestling and wrangling all night.

And then, suddenly, there came an interruption. He heard footsteps behind him, and an instant later something poked him violently in the ribs.

"How now?" a voice said—a masculine voice, rich and authoritative. "What's happening here? Is that you, Mistress Nancy?"

"Doctor Andrews!" the girl cried; and Christopher swung savagely round to confront the new arrival. Truth to tell, he almost welcomed the man's coming. Here, at all events, was someone of his own sex, with whom he could fight. He had endured having his face slapped by a woman, but no man was going to poke him in the ribs. His left hand was still occupied in holding the lady's wrist, but with his right he jerked out his sword and threw himself on guard.

"Who are you?" he shouted. "Stand back—or as there's a God above you I'll lay you dead at my feet!"

The figure before him did not recede an inch.

"Hold!" it thundered. "Not content with taking God's name in vain, do you threaten one of His servants with the sword? For shame, young man!"

Christopher leaned forward and peered at him. It was hard to see anything on such a night, but presently he made out the man to be a parson. This, to be sure, protected him against violence, but it rendered his arrival nonetheless opportune.

"A parson, are you?" he said. "Then I'll thank you to take charge of this young woman. Do you know who she is? You gave her a name just now."

His question was soon answered. The moment he released the lady's wrist she ran round and threw herself almost into the parson's arms.

"Oh!" she cried desperately. "I thought you would never come! I thought you had failed me—that you were not there. And in this lonely spot, when they took me out of the carriage—"

The parson put an arm round her shoulders.

"My dear young lady—" Christopher thought he had never heard a voice so richly parsonical—"my dear young lady, calm yourself, I pray. There was no danger—not the least. We have never been more than a few score yards from your carriage. But we had to be sure, and your silence baffled me. If you'd uttered but one cry, we'd have been here in a moment. At last I could stand it no longer, and came on alone. However, let us deal with this fellow. Who is he?"

Without waiting for a reply, he pulled a whistle from his pocket and blew a shrill blast on it. There was an answering hail, and Christopher heard the sound of many feet approaching at a run.

"Who is the man?" the parson repeated.

"I—oh, I don't know," the girl said wearily. "Some creature of Rochester's—my Lord Rochester. This man is not to blame; he is only a servant."

"My Lord Rochester? So *he* is the author of it! But

this is a serious matter—the forgery of a letter from the Queen's Chamberlain. Listen, young man. Do you assert that you were hired by my Lord Rochester to kidnap this lady?"

"I was told by my Lord Rochester that the lady wished to elope with him," Christopher said. "He asked me to take her to this house—the one among the trees there. And when I see his lordship again," he added, "I shall have something to say to him."

Before the parson had time to reply, the owners of the running feet appeared—four stout fellows armed with cudgels.

"What's the word, your Rev'rence?" the foremost of them asked.

"This young man here," the parson indicated Christopher, "I caught him in the act of mishandling the lady. When I came she was struggling in his arms."

"Oh!" The fellow flourished his cudgel ferociously. "And what'll we give him? Tar and feathers, is it? Or the duck pond at the corner of Ledd's Lane?"

The parson considered the point.

"The duck pond, I think, will suffice," he decided. "Tarring and feathering takes time, and we have to get the lady back to the Tower."

Christopher laughed scornfully. It seemed that he was not to be denied the opportunity of fighting, after all.

"My dear sir," said he, "pray don't be ridiculous.

I am armed, as you have seen. Can you honestly suppose that I shall submit to being ducked at your orders? If one of your bullies lays a finger on me, it will be the last thing on earth he'll live to do."

"To the duck pond," the parson said gently, and without another word his four henchmen moved to the attack. Their manner of so doing took Christopher by surprise. He had expected them to come in a blundering rush, without order or method, each getting in the others' way. Instead of that they separated widely, so that no two of them assailed him from the same direction. One went in front, one behind, and one on either side.

Christopher realized that he had laughed too soon. To say the least of it, he was in a very awkward position. He could have handled them singly with ease, and all together if he could have kept them in front of him, but not when they attacked him in this fashion. No swordsman, however good, can defend himself on all sides at once.

Then, before a blow could be struck, an intervention came from an unexpected quarter. The lady suddenly spoke.

"No!" she said. "I don't want him hurt. I—oh, stop them! Doctor Andrews—please!"

"But, my dear young lady, he offered you violence. It is right and fitting that he should be punished for it. We shan't hurt him—a ducking only. It will be a lesson to him."

"Nol" she said more firmly. "It may be that his story is true. He may have been deceived, as we were. It is possible. I won't have him ducked."

"As you wish," the parson said, after a pause. "Stand clear, boys—let him be." Then he addressed himself to Christopher. "You may account yourself lucky, young man. The lady has inhibited your punishment. You may go."

Christopher hesitated. He was not sure that he would not rather have been ducked than have had his punishment begged off in that way by the woman he had injured. She was sorry for him now, was she?—Thought him an object of pity. And the curse of it was, she made him feel like an object of pity, too. If ever in his life he wished that the ground would open and swallow him up, it was at that moment. Still, he supposed that she must be thanked for what she had done.

"You are too kind, madam," he said with a bow. "I—er—" And then he abandoned his pretense of flippancy and spoke earnestly. "Madam, I swear to you that I was deceived. So soon as I found out that you were not a party to the elopement, my only concern was for your safety. If I was violent, it was only to prevent you from running away alone into the darkness."

The lady did not reply, and for a while there was silence. Then, "You may go, young man," the parson said a second time.

Christopher went, and about an hour and a half later he arrived back at his lodging soaked to the skin. On the morrow he paid his promised visit to my Lord Rochester, but even that did not turn out precisely as he had expected. It might have, had he found his lordship alone, but he did not. There was another gentleman present when he was shown in—a gentleman magnificently appareled and studiously elegant of movement, whose person reeked of perfume and whose face was so liberally coated with powder as to make his age—to Christopher, at all events—a matter of uncertainty. His Grace of Buckingham, to wit.

"Ha!" Rochester began, "here's our knight-errant, Bucks, our kidnaper of fair dames! Let me present to you Mr.—Mr.—curse it! What's your name again, man?"

"Hallam, my Lord."

"Hallam! I present you, then, to the Duke of Buckingham. It was part of our bargain, if you remember."

Christopher bowed, and the duke turned his head and gave him a long, deliberate stare.

"Gad save us!" he said at last. "Who is the fellow, Jack? Does he dress like that from choice? That coat, man—those breeches! *Mon Dieu!*"

Christopher started forward angrily.

"I haven't come here to be made the butt of your wit, my Lord! I've something to say to you. I find that you lied to me about the lady yesterday—"

"The lady?" Rochester said eagerly. "Yes! You saw her, then?"

"Certainly I saw her! It seems that she was not a consenting party to the affair at all. It was not an elopement, in fact, but an abduction."

Rochester turned to Buckingham.

"That settles it!" he declared. "He saw her, therefore she was out of the Tower. I fulfilled my boast, and you owe me a thousand guineas. Is it agreed?"

"Wait," said Buckingham, "wait! Your proof is a trifle thin, methinks. You didn't see the lady yourself—no? Then have I to take your friend's word for it? My dear Jack, I'll do anything in reason; but this fellow—" he stared at Christopher again—"from the look of him, he'd swear away his mother's life for a groat."

"From the look of him," said Rochester, "he'll be at our throats in a minute. And there's your proof, if you want one. See the indignation writ on his noble brow! There's no pretense about that. 'Tis the real thing, if I ever saw it."

"Do I understand," Christopher demanded fiercely, "that I was sent on this fool's errand to satisfy a wager?"

"Precisely, my dear sir," Rochester laughed. "A little matter of a thousand guineas betwixt his Grace and myself. The idea of letting you take my place came to me while you were here yesterday. It tickled me, I confess—the thought of you finding that you

had abducted a real, live lady, and having not a ghost of a notion what to do with her. What *did* you do with her, by the way? If you took her to that house, I'll warrant you had a warm reception. The owner is a rank Anabaptist."

"Never mind that," Christopher said. "The question is, what I am going to do with you, my Lord. Draw and defend yourself, if you be a man at all."

"Ha, ha, ha! Is that proof enough for you, Bucks? By Gad, if you don't pay I'll have you published through the town as a welsher!"

"Draw, my Lord, draw!" Christopher reiterated.

His lordship only laughed the more, but Buckingham sat up and waved his hand disgustedly.

"Enough," he said. "Have done—I'll pay! Send for your lackeys and have the fool thrown out."

"My dear Mr.—er—damme, that name of yours will be the death of me!—my dear sir, compose yourself," Rochester urged. "I don't want you to break a blood vessel over my carpet. How can you possibly think that I shall fight you? What, be pinked through the body for a white-faced chit in a petticoat? Not on your life! I'd sooner be made the victim of an epigram."

"Then am I to suppose you to be a coward, as well as a liar?"

"If it pleases you," his lordship said, "why, certainly." He spoke as one conferring a favor. "I have always maintained that every man would be a coward

if he dared. Consider that, my dear sir, when you are recovered from your anger. There's the text of a sermon in it."

"Oh, have the man thrown out," Buckingham said plaintively. "Must I endure this all day?"

Sword in hand, Christopher stood glaring from one to the other. Neither rose or made any attempt to defend himself; Rochester seemed to regard him merely with amusement, and Buckingham with contempt.

"Well," he said at last, "if you be two noble lords, thank God I'm only a simple, honest gentleman."

Rochester laughed uproariously, and even Buckingham permitted himself a sour smile. Then the former rang a bell which stood on a table at his elbow.

"You may show this gentleman out," he said to the servant who appeared. "And be careful of him, too," he added, "for he is a very indignant gentleman."

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## S I X

### *Uriah Gaunt*

CHRISTOPHER received scant sympathy from Signor Peter over his affair with my Lord Rochester. "You ought to have known better, my lad," he said. "I've made a swordsman of you, but I doubt if I'll ever turn you into a man of sense. You were a fool in the business from start to finish. First of all, see, about the wench. He told you it was an elopement. Now, would a man who was eloping send another to take his place with the woman? Is it likely?"

"No," Christopher said, "maybe not. But—"

"And I'll tell you *why* he sent you," Peter went on. "This wench had been taken out of the Tower. The Tower, mark you. It wasn't a case of some shopkeeper's daughter. There was bound to be trouble over it—and does my Lord want it traced to him? No; so he sends you in his place—an unknown man."

"I see," Christopher said slowly. That aspect of the case had not occurred to him. "Then will it be traced to me?" he asked. "I gave the lady my name—and Rochester's, too."

"Never mind that," Peter replied. "She'd forget yours by the time she got home; and as for his lord-

ship, all he has to do is to deny it. He can easily prove he wasn't there, anyway. And then," he continued, "you go and act foolish the second time. You ask my lord to stand up and let you stick him." He rolled his eyes to the ceiling and gestured in despair. "And you a Yorkshireman an' all!"

"Well, I could have done it."

"Not a doubt but what you could! But you might have known that he wouldn't give you the chance. His sort don't fight, my lad, unless they know their man and are sure of winning."

"What ought I to have done, then?"

"Treated him gentle. Like. 'Now, my Lord,' you should have said, 'I've done your dirty work; what do I get out of it?' Polite, d'ye see, but with a hint of meaning behind it. And then, when he'd had time to think it over, you could have asked him for half of the thousand he won from Buckingham."

"But—good Gad! Why should he give me that?"

Peter winked at him.

"There's reasons," he said. "There's more to this than you know. How d'ye suppose that lass was got out of the Tower?"

Christopher shook his head.

"With a forged letter, bearing the seal and signature of the Queen's Chamberlain. A rank forgery, done by my Lord Rochester—or done *for* him. And there's mention of the Queen in it, too. It would be awkward for my lord if it came to the King's eyes—see?"

Christopher reflected for a moment. He vaguely remembered that the mysterious parson who had appeared during the night had said something about a letter from the Queen's Chamberlain. At the time, however, the matter had not seemed to concern him, and he had not thought about it since.

"Yes, I see," he said. "And how comes it that *you* know all about this, Peter?"

"Well, as it happens, I know the man that wrote the letter for him," Peter admitted unblushingly. "And he wrote it out twice—two copies just the same, so as to have one by him in case of need. His lordship was fishing in deeper waters than he knew when he set his hand to forgery. Somebody's going to have five hundred guineas, lad—you mark my words."

Christopher laughed. He had always felt that Peter was a rogue, and here was proof positive of it.

"So that's the way of it," he said. "Well, in the case of my Lord Rochester you have my sympathy. But I fancy you'll find him a hard nut to crack. Who's going to tackle him? You yourself, is it, or the man who wrote the letter? Or—" a sudden thought struck him—"or is it Colonel Blood?"

Whereupon Peter closed up like an oyster, as he always did at the mention of that dread name.

Christopher was not an ill-tempered youth, and his fury of resentment against my Lord Rochester soon burned itself out. There remained with him, as a result of the affair, however, a certain sense of disquiet, amounting at times almost to irritation. It was

not connected with his lordship, and at first he hardly knew what caused it. But gradually he became aware that it was most acutely present when he thought of the lady of the case and the poor figure that he had cut in her eyes. He did not, for that reason, jump to the conclusion that he was in love with her. There was a leaven of cold Yorkshire caution about him which forbade such easy romanticism. He would see what her face was like first, anyway.

Christopher had never been in love—not really in love. True, from the age of about fifteen he had been sentimentally attracted by the opposite sex. Indeed, at one period of his life he had fancied himself in love with nearly every presentable female he saw. Ripening years had robbed him of that fine catholicity, and now he regarded women from a slightly cynical standpoint.

In brief, he divided them into two classes: those of gentle birth, sweet young things whose ice-bound virtue excited them to orgies of sighing and languishing whenever a man was about; and those of birth other than gentle, who neither sighed nor languished, but looked a man in the eyes and gave him back chit for chat. From the former, of course, no man sought any favor greater than a fleeting pressure of the hand; from the latter every man took all that he could get.

It was a simple philosophy, and since coming to London he had found it somewhat inadequate. He saw women there who seemed to belong to neither category. There were ladies of birth and title who—

if all the stories he heard were true—extended far greater favors to their admirers than mere hand pressures. And besides them, there was also a vast indeterminate class that he could not place—who might either expect to be chastely saluted on the fingertips or chucked under the chin, he knew not which.

It was to this middle class, he supposed, that the lady of the carriage belonged. He could hardly think of her as a sigher and languisher, nor did she seem one who would delight in being chucked under the chin. On the other hand, she might very well give a man back chit for chat. She certainly had a tongue; some of the things that she had said to him made him feel hot all over. And yet, at the end, when the parson had wanted to duck him, she had asked that he might go free. Why?

There was no sense in worrying over it, he told himself. He would never see the girl again, and he was not at all sure that he wanted to. Buckingham's contemptuous remark: "That coat—those breeches!" had given him a pronounced feeling of inferiority where women were concerned. It extended even to serving wenches. If ever one of them giggled when he was taking his meal in an eating house, he always looked round to make sure that he was not the object of her mirth.

These considerations, however, did not prevent him from strolling in the direction of the Tower on his next free afternoon. To be sure, the Tower was interesting in itself, and that may have been why he

went. He had never been inside it, but he had often gazed at it from afar, and the sight of its grim ramparts and gray turrets never failed to give him a feeling of awe.

On that day the feeling was intensified into one of depression. It was nearly dark when he got there, and already the great bell was tolling to summon the inhabitants of the fortress within before the closing of the gates. It was not the building itself which depressed him, perhaps, so much as the slow, funereal beat of the bell. Somehow the sound seemed to him to express the spirit of the place, to mark it for what it was—a prison, a tomb of lost hopes. There sprang up in his mind visions of death and of the grave. He thought of the poor souls cooped up within, who must hear that bell every night of their lives, and know by its dismal clank that another weary day had gone by....

"Tchah!" He pulled himself up with a jerk. "Curse me, I'm getting the chills! That girl lives in the Tower, and she didn't seem to be exactly pining away with sorrow when I saw her. Anyway, she was all anxiety to get back there. If—"

He stopped short, and suddenly stared. He was standing in front of the Byward Gate, and a number of belated stragglers were hurrying past him to get inside before the gate closed. Among them, but traveling the opposite way to most, he saw a face he knew—an evil, twitching face, half-hidden in dirty gray hair.

"Mr. Uriah Gaunt," he said to himself. "The one and only Uncle Ury! It must have been the feel of him hovering near that gave me the chills. But what the devil's he doing round here?"

The man passed him by, moving at an odd, scuttling walk that was half a run, his shoulders hunched and his head inclined forward like a reptile's. Of all Signor Peter's friends, Christopher thought Mr. Gaunt the most remarkable. It was somewhere in this district, perhaps, that he carried on his alleged business as a ship's chandler. And presently, though he hardly knew why, Christopher turned and followed him.

He anticipated no difficulty in doing so, but it turned out to be none too easy. Mr. Gaunt's progress was not only rapid, but very irregular. At times he stopped short and peered round him, turning his reptilian head in every direction; at other times he broke into a run. Christopher had to keep him in sight, and he could never be sure that he had not been seen himself. Fortunately the light was very bad, and he took care to keep well into the shadows of the houses.

In this fashion they left the Tower behind, and proceeded westward for some distance along Thames Street. Then, after a final glare round, Mr. Gaunt suddenly dived down a narrow alley that led to the waterfront. By covering the thirty or forty yards that separated him from the end of the alley at a run, Christopher was just in time to see him disappear

into a doorway on the left-hand side of the alley.

After a pause to regain his breath, Christopher walked sedately down the alley. The doorway appeared to be that of a shop; at all events a murky shop window flanked it on one side. Opposite the window he halted. It was difficult to see through it in the failing light, but the space beyond seemed to be choked with objects innumerable, piled helter-skelter and with no regard for order or arrangement.

Mr. Gaunt had left the door open when he entered, and after a brief hesitation, Christopher followed him inside. The shop was narrow and ran a long way back, the rear being lighted by a hanging lantern. On one side was a sort of bench or counter littered with articles of clothing, mainly of a seafaring type; on the other, boxes, barrels, and packages were piled up almost to the ceiling. At the far end, beneath the lantern, he saw Mr. Gaunt.

The man paid him no attention, and did not even appear to be aware that he had entered. He was fussing over a keg of nails, fishing them out in handfuls and weighing them on a pair of scales. Seeing that he had only come into the shop a moment before, he had developed an extraordinarily rapid interest in the work, Christopher thought. Still, everything about him was abrupt and unexpected.

"You seem to have all sorts of things in here," Christopher said aloud.

"Hey?" Mr. Gaunt whirled round on him with a yell. He stared a moment, and then passed a hand

across his forehead. "Sink me, mister, but ye gave me a turn! I never heard ye open the door."

"I didn't open it. I found it open, and came in."

"That's right; come in, come in!" Mr. Gaunt howled. "No need to buy; come in and look round. And if ye be a shipmaster, why—" All this time he had been drawing nearer to Christopher, and now he broke off to stare again. "Why, damn my guts!" he said. "If it ain't—ay, it is—it's young Signor Alamo from Peter's. Well, well! My old eyes ain't what they were, and I never knew you."

He held out a dirty paw for Christopher to shake, and when that ceremony had been performed, took him to the back of the shop and gave him a box to sit on while he himself resumed his business with the keg of nails.

"And what are ye doin' down here?" he demanded.

"Oh, I'm just walking round."

"It's a long step from here to Peter's fencin' school."

Christopher saw that the man was suspicious of him.

"I came down here out of Thames Street," he said. "The same way as you came yourself. I thought it was you I saw in front of me, and I looked in to make sure."

Gaunt turned his head and stared at him, his furtive, close-set eyes boring into Christopher's face.

"Us bein' good friends, hey?" he said. "Me your Uncle Ury? And I take it kindly of ye, lad. It's not

everybody would look in to see an old feller like me. However, enough of that. What's this I hear about ye runnin' off with some woman from out of the Tower?"

Reflecting that he had probably heard the whole story from Peter, Christopher attempted neither explanation nor concealment.

"It was the work of my Lord Rochester," he said. "He made a fool of me."

"Hey? A fool of ye? Don't ye think it! A forged letter—why, ye've got him right under your hand."

"To blackmail, you mean? Nay, I haven't the gift for that. I'll stick him like a pig if he comes my way, but blackmail him—no. I'll leave that to others."

"Hey?"

"I said I'd leave the blackmailing to others."

"What others?"

"Well—" Christopher hesitated a moment—"Colonel Blood, let us say." He was curious to see the effect of that name on Mr. Gaunt.

The result was to move the man to mirth. He threw back his head and howled with laughter—a sort of cackling howl which, however, in no wise altered his expression save to deepen the wrinkles in his face.

"Colonel Blood!" he cried. "Who's been tellin' ye of him? Hee, heel! Haw, haw!—Ye'll make me choke. Colonel Blood! Why, boy, there ain't no such person. It's just a name to scare folks with."

"Is it?" said Christopher. "You should know."

"Yes," Gaunt shouted, "and I do know! Leastways," he corrected himself, "I don't know—I know nothin'. And nobody else does, neither. 'Cause there ain't nothin' to know, that's why. Stands to reason, don't it?"

"Then you know nothing whatever of Colonel Blood?"

"Nothin', as God's my witness. I swear it on the soul of my dead mother," said Gaunt, solemnly and blasphemously lying, with one dirty hand upraised toward heaven. "I tell ye there ain't no such person. There's things done in Colonel Blood's name, I grant ye that—many things. If I told ye all I knew, my lad, ye'd be surprised."

"I dare say I should," Christopher agreed drily.

"Ay," said Gaunt, "there ain't much happens that I don't know of." He tapped his forehead significantly. "In this world, boy, knowledge is power. That's what I mean about my Lord Rochester. See here."

He rose and scuttled away to the extreme back of the shop. Christopher saw him claw open a cupboard, out of which he took a large linen-covered bundle.

"See here," he repeated as he tugged at the cords with which the bundle was secured, "you look at these." Presently the wrapping fell apart, and there stood revealed two large goblets of embossed silver, so beautifully wrought that Christopher gave a cry of admiration.

"D'ye know what them are?" the owner demanded, setting them down on top of a box. "They're what

Popish priests have for drinkin' out of at Mass. Chalices, hey? I got 'em off a Portugese skipper down the river. Smugglin' priests in and out, he were, the dog! I knew it, see? I had the knowledge, and he had to pay for it. These were part of the price. And ye should do the same by my Lord Rochester. Don't leave it to no Colonel Blood."

Christopher did not reply. He had picked up one of the chalices and was admiring it.

"Pity it be empty, hey?" Gaunt chuckled. "Well, seein' as we're friends, I'll give ye somethin' to put in it. I've got some of the wine they use—a rare good brand of Oporto."

He went to the back of the shop again, and presently returned bearing a squat black bottle.

"Here y'are!" he howled. "I'm not goin' to fill it, or ye'd never get home, but I'll give ye a taste. Put down the cup."

He poured about half a pint of the wine into each goblet, grabbed one for himself, and thrust the other into Christopher's hands.

"To Colonel Blood!" he laughed, and drank noisily and unpleasantly.

Christopher sipped at his own portion. It was indeed a rare brand of Oporto, as rich and well-flavored as any that he had ever tasted. He took another swallow, letting it roll slowly over his tongue that he might savor it to the full.

"The real stuff, hey?" Gaunt said, and laughed again—a laugh as dry and rattling as the clatter of

dead bones. The sound made Christopher shudder. He suddenly realized the incongruity of it all—his drinking this fine old wine out of a cup that had once been a sacred chalice, drinking it in this filthy hole and in the company of a man like Uriah Gaunt. It seemed to him when he looked round that the shop was even dingier and darker than it had been before.

"The real stuff!" Gaunt repeated, smacking his lips. "It ain't to be wondered that the Papists call it the blessed blood of Christ. This stuff, it's for the priests alone. All the common folk ever get is the sight of them drinkin' it. They know a thing or two, them priests. Why—"

He suddenly stopped. Someone had come in through the open door—a slouching, thickset fellow with heavy, clumping boots.

"Hey!" Gaunt shouted. "You, Smarling, shut that door! And bolt it—quick!"

And then a curious thing occurred to Christopher. He turned his head towards the door to see who had entered, and found that he could see nothing. Black darkness seemed to be settling on him; even the evil face of Mr. Gaunt was no longer visible. He tried to get to his feet, and at the same time struggled to draw his sword. The result was that his legs crumpled beneath him, and he pitched forward on his face. That was the last thing he knew; an instant later he sank into unconsciousness.

The man who had just come in stopped short.

"Shut that door!" Gaunt yelled at him. "D'ye want all the street lookin' in?"

The man turned, closed and bolted the door, and then came forward to where Christopher lay.

"Who is he?" he asked.

"A-ah, to the devil with him!" Gaunt snarled. "It's that young hound that Peter Mason's took up with. He's fooled us finely, this feller. He's been one of Ormond's men all the time."

"And ye've killed him?"

"Nay, not yet. I gave him a dose of the China drops. He's for a hangin' tonight—it's time we had another. Where's the colonel?"

"I dunno. He should be here soon. But ye'd best be careful, Ury. There's others of Ormond's men about."

Mr. Gaunt stared, caressing his dirty gray beard uneasily.

"Gawd!" he ejaculated. "Are ye sure, Smarling? Who?"

"Downing. I met him face to face."

"And did he see you?"

"Maybe. I dunno. I dodged away quick, ye may be sure. I dunno if he saw me or no. But I saw him, plain as daylight. They're after ye, Ury."

A spasm of fury seized upon Mr. Gaunt, turning his aged visage into a thing of horror.

"Damn their lousy souls!" he screeched. "A-ah, God rot them!" He tore at Christopher with his claw-

like fingers, kicked his body over on its back, and glared into the upturned face. "If I had ye so ye could feel, ye swine, I'd cut ye to bits by inches! Who d'ye think ye are, sneakin' after me about the streets, ye dirty hound?"

"See what he's got in his pockets," the other suggested.

They did so most thoroughly and conscientiously, but discovered nothing except what any poverty-stricken young man might be expected to carry on his person.

"There's naught to do with Ormond here," Smarling said. "Maybe you're wrong about him, Ury."

"Tchah! Not likely," Gaunt spat out. "He follered me all the way from the Tower, sneakin' behind on the dark side of the road. Then, as soon as he got here, he started askin' me about Colonel Blood. I tell ye, Smarling, I went cold all over. There was I alone with him—a man his size, with a sword. I told him there weren't no Colonel Blood; it were just a name—all that, see? But he didn't believe me; I could see he didn't. So I gets him lookin' at them two cups, and at the finish I filled them for him. Gawd!" he shuddered, "if he'd suspicioned me, I should have been a dead man."

"Ay," said Smarling, "and if he'd been one of Ormond's men, he *would* have suspicioned you, seems to me."

"Well—I dunno. But I've got to finish him now, anyway. I can't let him wake up after this. All I want

is a thin cord—drew tight round his neck. Then we can take him out by the cellar and hang him up somewhere."

"Ye'd better ask the colonel first," Smarling said. "He's pertikler about these hangin's. If this ain't one of Ormond's men, there'll be the devil to pay."

"That's true," Gaunt admitted. "We can't hang him without the colonel gives the word. And we can't wait, neither. Lord, to think of it—Downing outside, and him lyin' there. He'll have to go into the river. I wish to God—"

He broke off as, suddenly and without warning, a loud knock sounded upon the door. The two men sprang apart, and each whipped out a knife. They stood waiting, facing the door—motionless, pale, and silent as death.

When the sound of the first knock had died away, there was a brief period of quiet. After that came two short, sharp raps, then a single one, and finally two more.

"The colonel," Smarling mouthed with voiceless lips.

"Wait!" Gaunt whispered. "I'm takin' no chances, not with him there." He jerked a thumb towards Christopher. "Come on, and keep your knife ready."

Together, treading softly, they approached the door. Gaunt laid his large, dirty ear against the key-hole.

"Who is it?" he demanded in a high-pitched, querulous voice—the voice a law-abiding citizen might be

expected to assume if unreasonably disturbed.

"Open the door, damn your eyes!" came the answer. "Must I shout my name for everyone in the street to hear?"

"It's the colonel," Gaunt said with a gasp of relief. "Praise be to God! Now we shall know what to do."

He unbolted the door, and a man stepped in, a tall, powerful-looking person in the garb of a seaman. A three-day's growth of beard covered his chin and a sinister black patch hid one of his eyes, but the instant he opened his mouth his identity was unmistakable.

"You've got to get out of here, Ury," he said. "Ormond's men are all round the place. I'm risking my neck by coming to tell you."

"Ay, by thunder, and don't I know it? There's one of 'em in here now."

"Who?" Blood said. "What? . . . Here—" he spoke to Smarling—"you get out. Go to the house in Whitefriars."

He opened the door again, and Smarling pulled down his hat over his eyes and squeezed out into the alley, now almost pitch dark.

"Now," Blood resumed, "what's this you say? There's someone here now? Where? Show me him."

Gaunt led the way to where Christopher was lying. "Who is he?" Blood asked.

The other told his story, making much of his own cleverness over the matter of the silver cups. "Now,

"what's it to be?" he asked. "A hangin', or does he go into the river?"

"Neither. You'll just leave him here."

"What? Leave him to wake up? I can't do that. If there's time for naught else, I'll cut his throat."

"Lord God, man!" Blood said impatiently. "Do you want to swing for murder? I tell you Ormond's men are all round. I saw Downing himself at the corner of Thames Street. If this fellow is one of Ormond's men, then Downing knows he's here, and will come after him. Can't you see that? And if he finds him with his throat cut, then that'll be the end of you, Ury. They'll know you for a murderer, and you can't hide that twitching face of yours. What you've done now is bad enough, without making it a murder."

"What *was* I to do, then?" Gaunt demanded harshly.

"Let him go the way he came."

"Let him go? After him talkin' the way he did—about you?"

"That was nothing. He'd heard of me from Peter Mason, maybe. I don't believe he's Ormond's man at all. If he were, Peter would know it. The trouble with you, Ury, is that you *like* to kill. As soon as you set eyes on a man, you want to murder him. But you can't do it this time. Cut that man's throat, and you've as good as cut your own. Well, I'll be away. I don't want to be caught here with him on the floor."

He laughed, and moved towards the door.

"Wait! I'll go with ye!" Gaunt cried, his voice shrill with fear.

"No, my friend, you won't," Blood smiled. "I want no company; we'll go different ways. I'll take the door, and you get out through the cellar. Don't try to follow me," he warned, "or I shall be saving his Grace's hangman a job."

He went, and having bolted the door behind him, Mr. Gaunt scuttled back to where Christopher lay.

"I can't leave him here to wake up—I can't," he whined.

He listened a moment, and then began furtively to finger his knife again. It was as Blood had said: Mr. Gaunt *liked* to kill. The sound of a passing footstep made him skip away in a hurry, dart to the back of the shop, and hoist up a trap door in the floor. He even started to descend the steps below, but presently halted and looked back.

"Maybe I could get him down here and into the river," he muttered. "If there be but time. But I must choke him first, or the water'll bring him round."

He pattered up the steps again, cut a length of cord from a roll which stood on the counter, and fashioned it into a running noose. Then, very cautiously, he approached the inanimate Christopher.

With a gasping intake of breath, he lifted Christopher's head by the hair and slipped the noose round his neck.

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## S E V E N

### *A Glass of Port*

OUTSIDE in the alley a thin rain was falling. Captain Downing, huddled under the shelter of a projecting roof, cursed savagely as he turned up the collar of his tattered cloak. It was a damnable business, this hunting of Colonel Blood, and not least so because it necessitated the constant adoption of a ragamuffin disguise. He was so used to dressing like a waif of the streets that he had forgotten the feel of clean linen. And probably it was quite useless, he reflected. No doubt Blood and his men knew him quite well enough by this time to recognize him in any disguise.

He stiffened and laid a hand on his pistol. A short, squat figure had come into sight, gliding towards him alongside the wall.

"You, Ben?" he whispered sharply.

"Me, sir. The sailorman's just come out—him with one eye. And why can't we get in the same way he did? I heard the knock he gave."

"The knock?"

"The knock at the door, sir. Two, it was, and then one, and then two more."

"H'm!" Downing thought for a moment. "But

what's the good?" he asked. "We know nothing against Gaunt except that he was holding forth on the ladder that day—the day Paddy Hogan was murdered."

"Maybe the big one himself is inside."

"Too good to be true, Ben," Downing said with a short laugh. "Still, we might try it. Either that or we go home. I'm not going to hang about here any longer."

They moved towards Mr. Gaunt's shop. A faint gleam of light shone through the window, but they could get no clear view of the interior.

"Very well," Downing whispered. "You give the knock, Ben. Most likely he won't open to us, but if he does—look out for trouble."

Ben knocked on the door—twice, once, and again twice. There was a pause, and then, listening intently, they heard a sound of stealthy footsteps within. After that came a voice.

"Who's there? Is that you again, Colonel?"

"Again?" Downing hissed in his companion's ear. "Did you hear that? 'Again,' he said. Then Blood has just gone out. That one-eyed sailor fellow must have been he—the man himself! And we had him under our noses—let him go—" He almost choked with indignation.

"Who is it?" the voice within asked again.

"Open, fool!" Downing ordered. "Who d'ye suppose it is?"

It seemed that he had said the right thing, for

there was a fumbling at the fastenings of the door. They heard a bolt withdrawn and a key turned; then, very cautiously, the door was pulled back an inch or two. As soon as that happened, Downing set his shoulder against it and thrust it violently open.

Silhouetted against the light of the lantern, they beheld the hunched form and twitching face of Mr. Uriah Gaunt. Only for a moment, however. The light revealed to him that neither of them was the man he expected to see. With a howl of fear Gaunt turned and fled. Bent nearly double to avoid a knife or a bullet, he scurried down the shop at a speed that was truly amazing, and vanished through the open trap door at the end like a rat into its hole. Almost before they had time to realize his presence, the trap door had closed over his head with a clang, and he was gone.

Too late, they started in pursuit, to be halted half-way by the sight of Christopher's body lying on the floor.

"Lord!" Downing ejaculated, "a dead man. There's been murder done. Who is he, Ben?"

Ben stared down into Christopher's face.

"I dunno who he is," he said, "but he ain't long dead. I saw him in the street less than an hour ago."

"H'm!" Downing felt Christopher's hand. "Still warm," he said. "I'm not sure that he *is* dead. There's no sign of a wound on him—no blood. And this cord round his neck hasn't been drawn tight, or there'd be a mark."

He dropped on his knees, laid a hand on Christopher's face; on his breast; and finally bent his head close and rested an ear against his breast.

"No, he's still alive—his heart's beating. He's been drugged, Ben; that's it. See that wine on the floor—those cups. And, good Gad, look at the kind of cups they are!"

For a while, in their interest in the cups, they forgot about the man, but presently they turned to him again.

"D'ye know, Ben, I've seen this fellow somewhere before," Downing said.

"Today, maybe—in the street," Ben suggested.

"No, it was before today—some time ago. But where the devil? . . . Aha, wait a bit: I have it! It was in the anteroom at Clarendon House. Woodford, his Grace's secretary, was offering the man money, and he scattered it all over the floor. Ay, I remember him now."

"Who is he, then?" Ben asked. "One of Blood's men?"

Downing considered Christopher frowningly.

"Lord knows," he said. "I never heard his name. But Woodford should be able to tell us. Look here, Ben, go out and see if you can find a chair for hire. You ought to get one in Thames Street. We'll take him to Woodford at once."

Ben went, and the other, having fastened the door, set to work to examine the shop. His first act was to try to raise the trap door through which the owner had disappeared, but this he found to be impossible.

It was evidently secured from below in some way, and tug and pull as he would, it remained immovable. In any case, he reflected, the man was no doubt far out of reach by this time.

Next he began to hunt round the shop itself, ferreting among the innumerable bales, boxes, and casks with which it was littered. For some time he found nothing to show that Mr. Gaunt was other than he purported to be—a respectable ship's chandler. True, the extreme dustiness and dirtiness of everything suggested that very little business was done in the shop. Most of the stock-in-trade seemed to have lain untouched for months.

But presently, rounding a corner, he came upon something fresh—a stepladder running upwards. On ascending it he found himself in Mr. Gaunt's bedroom. In contrast to the shop below, this was a bare, sparsely furnished apartment. It contained a bed with a mound of filthy blankets, a pair of wooden chairs, a chest of drawers, and very little else. Downing pulled open the drawers one by one and rummaged through their contents. And in the last one, hidden away at the back under a pile of clothing, he discovered what appeared to be an account book. For a while he studied it indifferently; then, grasping the meaning of what he read, he stiffened to the keenest interest.

"The deuce! Who are all these people? Troughton? Does he mean Sir John Troughton? . . . And Colonel Elijah Pettigrew? An old Cromwellian, by the sound of him. . . . And Hamilton—and Ashley. *Ashley!* Good

Lord, can it be *the* Ashley? . . . And they're all paying money—hundreds of pounds, some of them—to this old he-devil Gaunt. Who'd have believed it?"

He turned over a few pages, looking here and there at random, and presently found one on which a record was kept of the money that had been paid out. Here again he saw a name that startled him.

"Henriette de Lancey, eh? Forty guineas a week—nay, fifty here—sixty! The rapacious slut! Half of their takings must have gone on her. She's somebody's mistress, evidently. And Blood's, it must be; one can hardly suspect her of favoring Ury Gaunt. This must be looked into. Watch the lady, and we may catch Master Blood. Better men than he have been taken through a woman."

He would have gone on longer, but at that moment a faint, far-off knocking announced that someone was at the door of the shop. Slipping the account book into his pocket, Downing went and opened it, to find himself confronted by the faithful Ben.

"I've got a chair, sir. All ready and waiting."

"Good!" said Downing. "Come inside and help me to carry him, then."

Between them they hoisted up Christopher's inanimate form and put it into the sedan chair outside the door. One or two slouching wayfarers paused to peer at them, but soon went on, too accustomed to such scenes to linger and see a drunken man being pushed into a chair by his friends.

"To Clarendon House, his Grace of Ormond's resi-

dence in St. James' Street," Downing ordered the chairmen. Then: "D'ye know whose shop this is?" he asked sharply.

"Ury Gaunt's," said one of them.

"Then you know enough to understand the virtue of keeping a still tongue. Mum's the word, see? And now get on."

Christopher had a vague, blurred recollection of several things which happened that night. He was aware of being carried to and fro, of lying on a bed with a crowd of men round him, of candles being thrust before his eyes, of hearing his name spoken: "Mr. Christopher Hallam." But most of all he was aware that he felt ill, that his head ached intolerably and his throat felt as though it had been seared with fire. His chief wish was that all tiresome people would go away and leave him—which presently they did.

Then, later, he knew that a woman—an elderly, gray-haired woman with a kindly face—was lifting up his head and giving him something to drink. The liquid soothed his throat, and after that all things became blank again, and he slept.

He was aroused by a thunderous knocking, and sat up with a jerk to find that it was broad daylight. As he looked round, the person who had knocked walked in—a tall, ruffianly-looking fellow, dirty and unshaven, and clad in the remains of a fine brocaded suit.

"Well, Mr. Hallam," he said pleasantly, "are you

feeling better?" And from the tone of his voice Christopher knew that in spite of his appearance and attire, the man was still a gentleman.

"Much better, thank you," he said. "But—you know my name, sir. Who are you?"

"Name of Downing, sir. The man who took you out of that hole where you were drugged last night. You remember it, eh?"

Christopher nodded. He remembered it all perfectly—Mr. Gaunt's silver goblets, and the rare old Oporto that he had put into them.

"I have to thank you again," he said. "You took me out of Gaunt's shop and brought me here. But—pardon me—where am I?"

Downing sat down on the foot of the bed. He looked at Christopher steadily, and his expression seemed to have hardened.

"You are in the house of the Duke of Ormond, my friend. And I brought you here, not for the pleasure of your company, but because I wanted to talk to you. Some time ago, as I understand, you came to his Grace soliciting employment. Is that so?"

"It is."

"And why, Mr. Hallam? What was your object? To play the spy on behalf of Colonel Blood, was that it? Did he send you here?"

For a moment Christopher stared in blank astonishment; then he started up violently.

"A spy for Colonel Blood? . . . God's death, what next? I've never set eyes on the man in my life!"

Downing regarded him unmoved, unconvinced.

"No?" he said. "Then how did you come to be drinking with Ury Gaunt? He is certainly one of Blood's men—we know it."

Christopher plunged hotly into explanations. He described how he had seen Gaunt at Peter Mason's fencing school, and then, meeting him outside the Tower, had followed him home. "I knew he was a rogue," he said, "and I suspected him of having dealings with Blood. That's why I followed him. And at the end, like a fool, I let him get the better of me."

Downing nodded slowly. He was thinking that the Masoni School of Arms might well bear inspection.

"I see," he said. "You suspected he might have dealings with Blood, did you? Why? Had you heard talk of Blood from this—er—Signor Masoni?"

Christopher realized that he must be careful, else he would get his friend Peter into trouble.

"I'd heard talk of him, yes," he admitted. "Where is there not talk of Colonel Blood? . . . Signor Masoni is an honest man, I'd stake my life on it."

"So honest," Downing said drily, "that unless I'm greatly mistaken, he was nearly hanged for highway robbery three years ago. He would have been hanged if his friend Blood hadn't rescued him. They had a fight on the North Road—ten soldiers killed—a devil of a sensation. To be sure, I may be wrong. This mayn't be the same man. Captain Peter Mason, the highwayman's name was."

"Signor Masoni," Christopher said stiffly, "is a good

friend of mine. He took me in when nobody else would—gave me work, and paid me for it. Maybe he was on the high pad at one time; I neither know nor care. There are worse crimes than lifting a purse. I nearly took to it myself a while ago."

Downing rose and stood looking down at him.

"You're loyal to your friends, anyway," he said. "And I think you're telling me the truth, so far as you know it. You've an honest look about you, I'll say that." He turned away. "Stay here, then, while I speak to his Grace. In the meantime, I'll have some food sent up to you."

He went, and for more than an hour Christopher saw him no more. During that time he breakfasted, washed and dressed himself, and otherwise improved his appearance as much as possible. He was standing by the window and gazing impatiently out over the garden when Downing returned. With him was another—an elderly man of fine presence whom Christopher knew, though he had never seen him before, to be the Duke of Ormond himself.

"This is the man, your Grace," Downing said. "Hallam is the name he gives—Mr. Christopher Hallam."

Christopher bowed, and the duke looked at him thoughtfully.

"His name is Hallam right enough," the latter said. "No doubt of that, Downing. He is the living image of his father." Then he addressed himself to Christopher. "You are a younger son of the late Sir John, I take it?"

"A younger son, yes," Christopher said with a trace of bitterness.

The duke nodded. "I knew your father, Mr. Hallam, knew him well. But—" he smiled—"it would be stretching the truth, I fear, to say that we were friends. Nonetheless, I am sorry to see a son of his so sadly reduced."

"Your Grace was once so kind as to offer me money," Christopher murmured.

"Which, being your father's son, you refused. I did wrong to offer it, Mr. Hallam. I acted without thought, and I ask your pardon for it. However, there may yet be time to make amends. Are you still in need of employment?"

"Very much so, your Grace—in dire need of it."

"And are you prepared to enter my service?"

"I could ask nothing better."

"Then sit down. I must talk with you."

Christopher sat on the edge of the bed, the duke himself took a chair, and Downing remained standing.

"First," his Grace said, "I want to speak about your father. I knew him, as I say, but we were never friends. There was always a certain contention between us. But I'll say this for him: his loyalty to the cause he served was beyond question, and there was no man whom I'd sooner have had at my back in a tight corner."

He paused, and Christopher bowed.

"It is in the hope that your father's son possesses the same qualities," the duke continued, "that I am

now going to take you into my confidence. You will have it in your power to betray me—to go over to the enemy."

"It will be my earnest endeavor to justify your Grace's trust," Christopher said, wondering what was coming.

He was not left long in suspense. Briefly but plainly, the duke told him of his long-standing quarrel with Colonel Blood, of the murder of his servants, and of Blood's oft-reiterated threats against his own life.

"So you see, Mr. Hallam, the service I offer you will be dangerous—very dangerous. Once let Blood discover that you are a man of mine, and your life will be in peril every moment."

Christopher hesitated, not so much from fear as from doubt of his own capacity to serve. He could handle a sword or a pistol well enough, but more than that was required of a man who would cope with Colonel Blood. And in the tortuous methods of warfare employed by these rats of the London slums, he felt himself to be the veriest child. Witness the ease with which Ury Gaunt had outwitted him—an old wretch whom he could have annihilated with a blow.

"You refuse my offer?" the duke said. "On my soul, I don't blame you."

"Nay, your Grace, I accept it. But first I would ask this. How am I qualified to serve you? I am a stranger here—no Londoner. I know nothing of Whitefriars and its ways."

"It is for that very reason that I want your help,"

his Grace replied. "You are the last man whom Blood will think he has cause to fear. And to complete the illusion, I'm going to ask you to keep on with your work at the fencing school. Nay—" he stifled Christopher's protest with an uplifted hand—"not to betray Signor Masoni. No harm shall come to him, I promise you—or none through me. I am at war with Blood alone. I want you to take note of those who visit the place—their names and appearances—and bring a report to us here nightly. Will you do that, Mr. Hallam?"

Christopher inclined his head.

"I am at your Grace's service," said he.

During the same night that Christopher lay in a drugged sleep at Clarendon House, an adventure also befell my Lord Rochester. He spent the evening in a gaming house at Convent Garden, and having lost some two hundred guineas and drunk enough wine to render himself unsteady on his legs, he climbed into the sedan chair that was waiting for him, shouting an uproarious farewell to his friends, and set out for home.

The chair was his own—gilded, painted, emblazoned with his coat-of-arms, and furnished with silk hangings and the softest of cushions. As soon as it was on the move, he allowed himself to relax. He was a person very different when alone from the gay and volatile young rake who was seen in public. For one thing, he often felt himself to be a sick man.

There were times when his head ached, when a sense of weary lassitude pervaded him, or, commonest of all, when he was troubled by a nasty, hacking cough, and he had found his role of public entertainer difficult to maintain. So, pleading an appointment with a lady, he had left early—at a mere three o'clock in the morning—and generally behaved in a more decorous manner than usual. Now, sighing in relief, he lay back luxuriously on the cushions. Presently, lulled by the swaying motion of the chair, he sank into a doze.

He was aroused by the chair being set down, and half rose, expecting to see the light from his own front door. To his surprise, he found himself in total darkness. On either side, he could see the shadowy outlines of buildings, but nowhere was there the faintest gleam of light.

"What the devil?" he cried. "Hallo—Hopton! Mills! Where are we? What are you doing, fools?"

There was no reply, merely a shuffle of movement around him. From out of the darkness came a powerful hand, which, seizing him by the shoulder, forced him back into his seat. At the same time, the point of a weapon—a sword or a dagger—pricked gently against his ribs.

Then at last he heard a voice—a voice curiously soft and attractive, yet somehow charged with an undercurrent of menace.

"Have no fear, my Lord," it said. "Do but sit still, and you'll take no harm. We only wish to talk to you."

"What the devil?" his lordship said again, and then,

to his intense annoyance, he was seized with a fit of coughing. "Who are you?" he sputtered. "And where am I?"

"Never mind the who or the where, my Lord. The point is this. We—"

"But where are my servants—my bearers?" Rochester asked. "You've cut their throats, I take it."

"Oh, no, my Lord. They are as safe as yourself, asleep in a tavern. In the morning they'll come and tell you they had but one jack of ale apiece. Which, as it happens, is true. It was what we put into the ale that did the trick."

"I see. Very well, then, your business. And be brief."

"Some time ago—a week, it may be—you sent a letter to a certain Mr. Talbot Edwards, resident in the Tower."

"What if I did? And how do you know of it, my friend?"

"I have the letter in my possession, my Lord. Or a copy so like it that nobody could tell the difference."

Rochester drew a deep breath, thought a moment, and finally laughed.

"Well, well, well!" he said. "So the man Twidale has betrayed me, has he? I paid him fifty guineas for writing that letter, too. There's ingratitude for you!"

"If the letter came to His Majesty's eyes, my Lord, there might be trouble."

"There might," his lordship agreed. "Trouble for Mr. Twidale, decidedly."

"And for your lordship also, I venture to think."

Rochester laughed again. "Hardly, my dear sir, hardly! His Majesty knows me well, I grant, but he'd take my word against that of a self-confessed forger."

"It wouldn't be a question of your word against a forger's," the unknown said gently. "There'd be the words of Mr. Edwards and his daughter, of the man Taprell whose carriage you hired, of Mr. Christopher Hallam—you remember him, the young man you fooled so finely—of a certain parson who was present and saw all that happened, of—"

"The deuce!" his lordship ejaculated. "You seem to know more of the affair than I do."

"I have been at some pains to have it investigated, my Lord."

"And all these people would be brought as evidence against me?"

"All these and more. It's easy enough to suborn evidence."

"Ha, ha! Egad, you're a very devil of a fellow, I vow! Why haven't we met before? . . . Well, it would seem I must submit. You want to sell me the letter. For how much?"

"Five hundred guineas, my Lord. Half of what you won in wager from his Grace of Buckingham."

"Eh? Half only? Man, your moderation overwhelms me! Why not ask it all?"

"Dog does not eat dog," the unknown chuckled. "We only share and share alike."

"Do we so? Lord, you're flattering! Birds of a fea-

ther, are we? However, it ill becomes me to complain. Five hundred guineas. And when and where will the transaction take place?"

"One of my men will wait upon your lordship tomorrow at noon. You will give him the money, and later in the day he will bring you the letter."

"A most fair, most equitable arrangement, on my soul! But there are just one or two points, my dear sir. The first is this. Having handed over the money, what guarantee have I that I shall receive the letter?"

"None but my poor word, my Lord."

"Is it so, indeed? Dear, dear! And you won't even tell me who you are."

"If you insist, my Lord. The name is Blood. Colonel Blood."

Rochester smote his hand against his brow.

"Never again," he said, "will I call a man fool! To think that I have been sitting here and talking to you for ten minutes, and never realized it. Colonel Blood, of course! Who else could you be?"

"Tomorrow at noon, then," the colonel said, "my man will call upon you for the money."

"And tomorrow at noon," Rochester replied, "I shall bid your man go to the devil, as I now do you, Colonel."

And sweeping aside the sword blade that threatened him, with a sudden movement of his hand, he sprang to his feet and tried to leap out of the chair. To do the last, unfortunately, he had to expose himself to attack in the rear. The point of the sword

pricked him sharply in the rump; hands clawed at his arms and shoulders; and he was hurled back. He sat there coughing, his sudden spurt of valor very thoroughly knocked out of him. It pained him even to sit on the soft cushions, and he felt a trickle of blood from his wound running down his leg.

"A stab in the back," he said when he had recovered his breath. "O most gallant colonel!"

"Nay, not a stab," Blood replied amusedly. "A mere pinprick, my Lord, to remind you that it pays to be polite. You bade me go to the devil, and that touch on the seat of your breeches was designed to show how easily you yourself might be sent to him. Now, listen!" His voice took on a more threatening note. "We have talked enough. My man will call upon you tomorrow, and you will pay him the five hundred guineas. If you do not, then that letter will be in His Majesty's hands before the end of the day, and he shall learn how you use the Queen's name. That's all, my Lord, except to wish you a very good night. Come, lads, let's away."

The clutching hands and leveled blades were withdrawn, and their owners vanished like wraiths of the night, leaving his lordship to get home as best he could.

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## EIGHT

### *Hallam Freed a Prisoner*

SO at last Christopher had achieved his ambition—service with a nobleman, and an income that he felt to be commensurate with his needs. The disadvantage of his new employment was that it involved his deceiving Signor Peter. To be sure, the ethical right or wrong of so doing did not worry him. No doubt Peter had deceived him often enough. But it meant that he would have to be perpetually on his guard, lest something he might do or say arouse suspicion.

After one day's absence he turned up at the fencing school with a carefully prepared story. In the main it was true, but not altogether so. Beginning with a tirade against Ury Gaunt, he told how he had met that gentleman near the Tower, had followed him to his lair, and there had been drugged and well-nigh poisoned.

"Huh! Doctored your drink, did he?" Peter said, rubbing his chin. "Now, why should he do a thing like that? Ye followed him secret-like, eh? Maybe he took ye for a spy from the Customs. He has a finger in many pies, has Ury."

"How should I know why the old fool did it?" he said. "All I know is that I woke up next morning in a cellar down by the river—a black, dirty hole alive with rats!" This was the one great inaccuracy in his statement. "And my head—good Gad, I thought it would split in two! Wait till I get hold of Ury again. His gray hairs won't save him. The next time he comes here, Peter . . ."

He ranted on, while Peter continued to stroke his chin and listen. The story of the cellar had not deceived him for a moment. He already knew all about the night's happenings, knew even that Christopher had been taken away from Gaunt's shop in a sedan chair. Those passing wayfarers who had paused to stare had not been as innocent as they seemed.

Since Christopher was lying, then it followed that he must have some reason for doing so. And that reason could only be that he had come back as a spy. Far from angering Peter, this afforded him the greatest gratification. A known spy, who could be relied on to carry to the enemy precisely the information it was desired that he should get, was an object to be cherished to one's bosom. Best of all, it meant that Christopher's life would be safe. So long as Blood found him useful, he would be spared. Nevertheless, Peter could not help feeling a little sorry for Christopher. He was so young, so full of himself, and so utterly out of his depth in the dark waters that he was trying to fathom.

"You were lucky, my lad," he said gravely. "I dunno who put you in that cellar, but it might just as well have been the river. I wouldn't be surprised if it were Ury himself. He'd go through your pockets, see—and when he found nothing to connect you with the Customs, maybe he was sorry for what he had done. He ain't altogether bad, even Ury...."

For the next week or so, therefore, Christopher worked in the fencing school by day, and in the evening reported the result of his observations to Captain Downing. He always had something interesting to report, Peter saw to that. It was a process that harmed nobody, and in the meantime, thanks to his increased income, Christopher was able to buy himself a new outfit of clothes. The suit he got was of the latest and most fashionable cut—or so the tailor assured him—and he admired himself in it immensely. No longer could his Grace of Buckingham or my Lord Rochester sneer at the shape of his coat and breeches; no longer need he fear the giggles of serving wenches. With a periwig on his head and a fine foam of lace at his wrists and throat, he felt that he could cut a figure anywhere.

His opportunities of cutting one, however, were decidedly limited. At the fencing school he had to wear the same old threadbare clothes that he had worn before, else Peter would notice the change. In the evenings he met Downing, and to don his best in order to meet a man who made a practice of look-

ing like a scarecrow was ridiculous. Altogether, his new finery bade fair to wear itself out by hanging in his cupboard.

He decided that he must find some woman to bedazzle. Every young man of his age, he told himself, had a woman to love, and to love *him*. All of which, of course, was the merest pretext. His new clothes had been bought in the first instance for the purpose of dazzling one woman, and one only. But it was some time before he summoned up courage to put them to the test.

There were difficulties in the way, certainly. First and foremost was the fact that the lady lived in the Tower. How was he to get to her? And if he surmounted that, what was he to say to her? The chances were that she would order the warders to throw him out. It was not to be supposed that she was as interested in him as he was in her.

He was resolved to make the attempt, however. And after much thought, he managed to evolve a campaign. Obtaining a large sheet of white paper, he folded it in the form of a letter, sealed it with his father's signet ring, and on the outside wrote the words, "To Mr. Edwards, in the Tower." There was nothing written on the inside, and he had no intention of ever delivering it to Mr. Edwards. It was to be used merely as a means of gaining access to the Tower. He had already discovered how great was the power of the written word with doorkeepers and the like. And then, when he got inside, the possession of

the letter would provide him with an excuse for asking where Mr. Edwards lived. Beyond that his plan did not go. Nothing that he could arrange beforehand would alter the way in which the lady received him.

On the next Sunday afternoon, then, he dressed in his best and set forth for the Tower. On the way there, remembering what had happened to him last time, he kept a sharp lookout for Mr. Ury Gaunt. But he saw neither him nor anyone else whom he knew; until he reached the Byward Gate nobody addressed a word to him. When he tried to enter, however, he was confronted by a warder with uplifted halberd.

"Can you tell me if there's a Mr. Edwards in the Tower?" Christopher asked.

"Mr. Edwards? Why, yes, sir. Mr. Talbot Edwards, the Keeper of the King's Jewels. He lives in the Martin Tower, above the jewel room. Have ye the password, sir?"

"No, but I've a letter for Mr. Edwards. That should suffice. Here it is. Sealed, you see."

He took the letter from his pocket and held it out for the warder's inspection. It was plain from the way the man handled it that he could not read, but that did not prevent him from examining the letter most minutely. He turned it this way and that, tapped it with his forefinger once or twice, and finally handed it back with a nod.

"Pass, sir," he said, and Christopher walked

through the gateway and across the drawbridge. It had been easy, he told himself, easy. If everything else turned out as well, he would have the lady in his arms in a minute or two.

He still had some distance to go to reach the Martin Tower, which stood in the opposite corner of the fortress to the Byward Gate. But at length, by dint of asking his way several times, he arrived there—and then hesitated, wondering what to do next. All kinds of doubts and difficulties suggested themselves to him. There might be two Mr. Edwards, and the one in the Martin Tower not the girl's father at all. In any case, he must ask to see the man himself, not his daughter. And what then? Say to him: "I've come to look at your daughter, sir. Have the goodness to trot her out, will you?" Lord!

As an opening to the conversation he decided to ask some innocuous question about the Crown Jewels. And presently, having fixed upon a suitable one, he marched up the steps and rapped boldly on the door. In response to his summons, there appeared a large black cat, which advanced towards him with a great air of friendliness, and ended by rubbing itself round and round his ankles. He stooped and caressed it for a while; then, losing patience, he knocked at the door again. It was standing wide open, but all that he could see within was a bare stone corridor. Save for the cat, there was not a sign of life anywhere. He knocked a third time, but still without success.

"The deuce!" he muttered angrily. "If this is the

way they guard the jewels, you'd think a man might run off with the lot. Why did I come, curse it? What am I to do?" He tried kicking at the door for a change, and then shouted through his cupped hands: "Hallo! Hallo! Within there! Is anyone at home?"

Apparently no one was; there was no reply, at all events. And at last, in desperation, he walked in and down the corridor. On the way he passed a great iron-studded door—which, had his mind been less perturbed, he might have guessed to be the door of the jewel room. As it was, he saw in it only the entrance to a dungeon, and of a sudden the full horror of what he was doing burst upon him. He was in the Tower on false pretenses, and if anyone discovered him he would very soon be languishing behind a door like that.

At the end of the corridor he discovered a steep, narrow flight of steps winding upward. There again he halted; but, hearing nothing, he began to go up step by step, walking on tiptoe, holding his breath, and often pausing to listen with a foot poised in mid-air. Had he heard anyone coming down to meet him he would have turned and fled.

No such thing happened, however, and presently he reached the top of the stairs. There he found another corridor, lighted by a narrow, barred window at one end. And there, too, for the first time he heard something. A sort of tapping noise it was, as though someone were knocking at a door. Repressing an inclination to bolt, he looked round. There were

several doors to be seen, and some of them were open; but it was from behind one which was closed that the sound came. And he saw that it was not only closed, but locked—and the key was on the outside.

"Is anyone there?" he asked, and started nervously as the stone walls and roof gave back an echo.

"Yes! Open the door, please," said a voice from within.

The voice was a woman's, and Christopher stepped forward and turned the key in the lock. He took no thought of what he was doing—that this might be one of the prisoners in the Tower whom he was setting free. He simply acted on impulse and when the door swung open and the woman came forth, he drew back and stood gazing at her.

She was quite young—not more than twenty, if that much. She could not be called tall, but was very erect and slender, and her figure was perfection. Her head was bare, revealing a mass of golden brown hair; her face, if not an artist's ideal of beauty, was marvelously vivid and piquant, broad-browed, red-lipped, and lighted by a pair of wonderful dark blue eyes.

Christopher did not take in all this in a moment. He stared at her, and stared again—the process must have gone on for nearly a minute before he awoke to the realization of his boorishness. Then, to cover his confusion, he swept off his hat in what he hoped was the most irreproachable manner. The young lady acknowledged his salutation with a slight bow, and looked at him inquiringly, waiting for him to speak.

"Madam," he began in a great hurry, "madam,—your pardon, but have I the honor to address Mistress Edwards?"

"Mistress Nancy Edwards," she said. "Who are you, sir?"

"Christopher Hallam, madam—at your service."

"Hallam?" She seemed to think, and then her expression changed. "What? Christopher Hallam! You are the man who—who—"

"The same," Christopher said. "I—er—I felt that I must—"

"And you have dared to come here? Here—into our very house!"

"I came to see you," he said simply.

She looked at him, the indignation in her face struggling first with surprise, then with amusement. Finally she gave a little laugh.

"Well, you have seen me," she said. "Now go."

"I have to thank you first for saving me from a ducking," he suggested.

"Oh—that!" She made a gesture of dissent.

"And also—" Christopher suddenly became very earnest—"I want to talk to you about what happened that night. On my honor, I had nothing to do with it; I was as much deceived as you were." And he entered upon a long explanation, describing the whole of his connection with my Lord Rochester, even to how he had afterwards challenged him to fight and been laughed at for his pains. "It's true," he said anxiously, "every word. I swear it! Don't you believe me?"

She believed him. She had almost believed when he protested his innocence in the dark, and now that she could see his face she no longer had any doubts. Christopher was not a handsome man, perhaps, but there was that about him which would have prevented the most fearful of maidens from thinking him a villain.

"Yes, I believe you," she said after a pause. "And so you asked my lord to fight you, and he would not." She laughed. "How old are you, Mr. Hallam?"

"Twenty-three, madam."

"So old? I thought you were about seventeen."

"Seventeen? Why?" Whereat she only laughed the more. "I'll warrant I'm older than you are," Christopher said in some indignation.

"Perhaps. But you are so different—so very different—from what I had imagined you." Her thoughts still seemed to amuse her. "But we can't stand here talking," she went on. "You must go, and I will return to my room."

The mention of her room reminded him of the locked door—of the key that he had turned to set her free.

"But you were a prisoner there," he said.

"Yes, sir, a prisoner in the Tower. And you rescued me. Most romantical, is it not?"

"But who did it?" Christopher asked. "Who put you there?"

"Will you challenge him to a duel, sir?"

"Most certainly I will!" he declared with mock ferocity. "Only tell me his name! . . . And are you alone, too—alone in this great echoing tower?"

"All alone," she sighed. "All alone, sir, and weeping in my cell—till you came. It is the most romantical thing that ever happened."

Her "cell," from what he could see of it through the doorway, was a bedroom, and not so ill-furnished at that.

"But who put you there?" he asked again.

"Alas, my father—my cruel father," she said. "And he hasn't used a sword for twenty years, so you can't even challenge him to a duel."

"Your father? But why should he do such a thing?"

"Oh," she shrugged, "he has his reasons, I suppose. Or he thinks he has."

"And he has gone away, leaving you imprisoned in that room?" Christopher could hardly believe it. His mind conjured up visions of death by slow starvation.

"Only for an hour or two, while he and my mother go to visit Sir John Robinson and his lady."

"Sir John Robinson?"

"The Lieutenant of the Tower, I mean."

"Oh," said Christopher. "He is still inside the Tower, then."

"In the Lieutenant's quarters, I imagine. Very uncomfortable too, most likely—drinking tea, which he hates."

Christopher laughed. There was something very refreshing about this girl. She was more than merely good to look upon; she had a liveliness and sparkle that were all her own.

"But I still don't understand," he said, "why your father should lock you in your bedroom when he goes out."

"He couldn't trust me—or so he said."

"Couldn't trust you? . . . In what way?"

"Well—" she looked down at the toe of her shoe—"in the matter of my Lord Rochester, he thought—or pretended to think—that I was partly to blame. That I had encouraged my lord, in effect. It is not true, sir; I did no such thing. But he would have it so, and before going out today he locked me in here—to keep me from exercising my fascinations in his absence. That was what he said, sir. As if I should!" And she raised her eyes again, blue and limpid with innocence.

"As if you would." Christopher took possession of her hand. "As if you would," he repeated. "What an ideal!"

"Monstrous!" she said. "And now you must go, sir—really."

"But I shall see you again. May I not?"

"How? You are not likely to find my father away a second time."

"No matter; we can find a way."

He kissed the hand he held, and then somehow his

fingers began to slip up her arm. She let them continue until they were halfway round her shoulder before she jerked them away.

"You are being foolish, sir," she said. "Please go."

"But I may see you again?" he pleaded.

"Oh, you men are all alike! You are worse than my Lord Rochester. What do you want with me?"

"Only to see you again."

She looked at him for a moment, and then an irrepressible gurgle of laughter escaped her.

"Imagine," she said, "if my father could see us now—if he could hear our talk! . . . I don't know why I have told you all this, or why I even let you speak to me. I suppose I did it to spite him, because he shut me up here. And it's very wicked of me. You must think me a shameless baggage."

Christopher, needless to say, thought no such thing. In point of fact, he was wondering whether her resentment against her father would go to the length of allowing him to kiss her. To kiss her properly, that is—on the lips. There was a challenging look in her eye, and he was sorely tempted to try his luck. What kept him back was a certain distrust in his own powers. He was afraid of making a bungle of it. An awkward, misplaced kiss would be fatal; she would think him a clumsy oaf.

"Well?" she said at last. "Won't you go?"

"Yes—I'll go. But I *must* see you again."

"Why?"

"Because—oh, I don't know—because you are lovely—adorable! . . . I love you; that's why."

Christopher hardly knew what he was saying. For the moment his Yorkshire hardheadedness and common sense were very much at a discount. As for the young lady, she laughed at him. It was not an unpleasant laugh, however.

"But that is ridiculous," she said. "You don't know anything about me. I may be a bad woman—disreputable. Look at the way I am behaving now."

"You are not a bad woman—I know you are not! I wouldn't care if you were. I love you! You may call it foolish—ridiculous—anything you like. But it is true."

The girl considered him for a while in silence. Then: "You are a nice boy, Christopher," she said softly. "I'm sorry I was so unkind to you that night. But oh, how young you are! You make me feel a very grandmother."

Christopher drew back, heavily chagrined. That was the second time she had mentioned his youth. A nice boy, was he? A child babbling of what it did not understand?

"Madam, I assure you—" he began; but she checked him with a gesture.

"Not madam," she said. "I have a name to call me by. Nancy."

"Nancy, then." And he swung abruptly from one extreme to the other. "My darling!" He even tried to take her in his arms, but she held him off.

"No, Christopher, no! If my father found you here he'd keep me locked up for the rest of my life. You really must go."

"When can I see you again?"

She thought for a moment.

"On next Sunday afternoon, a week from today, I will be in my Lady Robinson's garden; if I can, and if the weather is fine—not if it rains. It is the most ridiculous folly, but—S-sh! Is that someone below?"

They listened breathlessly, and then the young lady slipped back into her room.

"Lock the door on me, and go," she whispered. "Christopher, do go—I implore you!"

"Till Sunday, then." He caught her hand and kissed it, pulled the door to and turned the key.

An instant later he was scurrying down the stairs—and only just in time. A delay of even a single minute would have been fatal. As he walked across the parade ground toward the White Tower he saw an elderly lady and gentleman coming to meet him. They were husband and wife; he could tell that from the expressions on their faces. And he was equally sure that they were father and mother. He strode past them with a little self-conscious swagger, meeting the old gentleman's disapproving stare with a complacent smile.

On leaving the Tower, he went straight back to his lodging. He arrived there feeling as though he were walking upon air, but he was brought abruptly back to earth by a letter which he found awaiting

him. It was from Captain Downing, and asked him to go to Clarendon House immediately upon his return.

"The deuce!" he said. "He has some news of Blood, I take it. Well, I suppose I must go."

He went without even taking the time to eat or to change his clothes, and after being kept waiting in the hall for half an hour was shown into a room where Downing was closeted with a tall, pleasant-faced young man whom he had never seen before.

"Hal! Here you are," Downing said. "Curse me, though—" he eyed Christopher's raiment askance—"you're dressed mighty fine! What the devil? A woman, is it?" He shook his head. "Keep clear of them, my lad. That way lies damnation."

"To say nothing of other trouble," Christopher replied. "Who's our friend?" he added, nodding toward the stranger.

"Our friend," Downing told him with a smile, "is my Lord Ossory, his Grace's son and heir. . . . And this, my Lord, is Mr. Christopher Hallam. You might think him the Duke of Buckingham from his dress, but he isn't, on my word."

Christopher bowed. "Your Lordship will pardon me. I didn't know—"

"Of course not," Ossory laughed. "I've been out of town for the last month, and you haven't seen me. I'm glad to make your acquaintance, Hallam. Sit down, man."

"And now," Downing said, "let's to business. The

point is this. His lordship and I have worked out a plan—a way in which we think Master Blood can be taken."

Ossory nodded confirmation.

"It's not a way I like," he said. "I haven't dared to tell it to my father, in case he should order us to drop it. But against this hellhound Blood we can't be squeamish. Any means may be used."

"What is the plan?" Christopher asked.

Downing set himself to explain. "When I took you out of Ury Gaunt's shop, young man, I also purloined a book that I found there. A book of accounts, I may call it. And in it we found evidence that a certain woman used to be Blood's mistress."

"A very well-known woman," Ossory amended. "I've danced with her myself. Lord, to think of it! If I'd known whose woman she was, I'd have wrung her neck."

"She used to be Blood's mistress," Downing resumed, "but she is not so now. He gave her up about three years back. And I don't blame him, either; she was too curst expensive for any man to keep. Between two and three thousand a year she had out of him. However, that's neither here nor there. The point is that he gave her up, and as you might expect, she's none too well pleased about it. A discarded woman never is; she always turns sour on you. Mark that, young man—you with your fine clothes."

"And the plan?" Christopher prompted.

"The plan is that we get the lady to ask Blood to

visit her. Get her to write him a letter. A piteous appeal, so to speak—the cry of a broken heart."

"Will she do it?"

"If we pay her enough," Downing said cynically.

"And will Blood come?"

"We hope so. He must have had an affection for her once. And if she could be persuaded to be ill—or dying—"

"How do you like the idea, Hallam?" Ossory asked.

"Not at all, my Lord," Christopher said frankly.

There was a pause, during which they stared at one another uneasily.

"Well," Downing said at last, "do we try it? . . . God's death!" he went on violently. "Why hesitate? Blood is a murderer fifty times over. Think of Paddy Hogan, my Lord—hanging by the neck from a barber's pole!"

"I know," Ossory groaned. "We must try it; it would be folly to do otherwise. Go and see her, then, Downing. Offer her two thousand guineas."

"As much as that, my Lord?"

"Ay. And offer it to her at once—that or nothing. Don't start haggling with the woman, for God's sake!"

Downing nodded slowly.

"Very good," he said. "And I'll take Hallam with me, by your leave. I want him to see the inside of her house. It's there that we shall catch Blood, if at all."

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## NINE

### *The Colonel's Mistress*

MISTRESS—or Madame, or sometimes even Comtesse—Henriette de Lancey was a lady of the most arresting beauty and icy good breeding. From the tip of her aristocratic nose to the soles of her diminutive shoes, she was emphatically a product of the *haut monde*—one of those women whom the man in the street sees only from afar, passing in and out of the doors of Whitehall, lounging in magnificent carriages, walled away from him by the unscalable barriers of wealth and position.

It was said of her that she was the daughter of a French nobleman, a count at the least, and probably a duke. The statement may have been true; but if it were, she did not know it. The first home she remembered was the hut of a woodcutter in Epping Forest. Where the woodcutter had obtained her none but himself ever knew. He gave out that she was his own daughter, and never referred to the beautiful woman who had visited him one night, coming out of the darkness and stepping away into the darkness, leaving behind her a tiny baby—Henrietta, named after Charles the First's queen.

For the next fourteen years she lived in the house

of the woodcutter. One day was much the same as another there, but in the great world outside mighty events were happening. The Civil War was fought and won; the King lost his head; and Cromwell and his saints lorded it over the land. At fourteen, Henrietta was slim and straight, with wavy dark hair as lustrous as silk, large blue eyes, and a flawless skin of the most delicate pallor. She was a great deal too beautiful, in fact, to remain long unsmirched in such surroundings.

Eventually she lost her virtue in a cow shed, to an independent minister who had inveigled her there on the pretext of saving her soul. Afterwards, to be sure, he made amends by beating her soundly and declaring that she had a devil. Nay, he did more; he so worked upon her adopted father with his threats of the wrath to come—his talk of burnings and roastings and boilings—that the poor man immediately turned her out of his house.

A week later an old lady, the widow of a fallen Cavalier, found her crouching in a ditch and took pity on her. Half as servant and half as companion, she remained with that lady for three years. They were, perhaps, the best years of her life. She learned to read and write, to speak correctly, to drop a graceful curtsy, to enter and leave a room—all the thousand and one artificialities which go to make up feminine deportment. But, unfortunately, she learned also to look into the eyes of men, to preen herself before her mirror, and to observe with pride the

beauty of her body. Worse still, she discovered that wherever she went, men sought her out for their attentions, and that by the exercise of a little tact, she could bend them to her will.

Time passed, and Cromwell and his saints passed with it. A new king sat on the throne, and there was much talk of the glory and wickedness of the court. And one day came a fine gentleman who, after sundry stolen interviews in the old lady's orchard, asked her to run away to London with him. To London, where the court was—the goal of every girl's ambition! She went.

On arriving there she found that her gentleman, in comparison with others she saw, was not so fine after all. In due course, she passed from him to another, and from the second to a third and a fourth. All of them made fiery love to her, and perhaps all loved her after their fashion. But she loved none of them. Love had no part in her scheme of things; each man simply represented a step up the ladder which she had set herself to climb.

And then, suddenly and surprisingly, she met a man who meant something more to her than a provider of food and raiment. He came upon her out of the night, as she herself had come upon the poor woodcutter. She had been to a gaming house with her protector for the time being—a vacuous, self-important person who possessed no virtue in her eyes but wealth. Of which wealth he had parted with a good deal that night, and, furthermore, he was drunk.

In spite of her promiscuity, there was a certain fastidiousness in Henrietta—a legacy from her unknown mother, perhaps—which made her detest a drunken man. As her admirer clawed and clutched at her outside the gaming house door, she shivered with disgust, and presently, losing control of herself, began to struggle and scream. The astonished gentleman clawed the more, howling with maudlin indignation. The idea of a harlot daring to resist his manly embraces! A harlot, too, tricked out in the clothes which his bounty had provided!

His outpouring of wrath was cut short by his being seized by the scruff of the neck, lifted clean off his feet, and flung sideways to fall on his face in the gutter. And Henrietta, back against the wall with her hands pressed to her breasts, beheld before her a gigantic man dressed all in black—a man boldly handsome of face, sparkling of eye, and roguish of smile.

"My pretty one!" He took off his hat and bowed before her. "Think no more of that poor trifler. He is gone—puff!" And he made a gesture signifying utter extinction. "Now, where can I take you?"

She looked at him, fearfully at first, but with gradually returning confidence. His voice had been soft as a caress; but he was a man infinitely dangerous, she knew. And yet—he had come out of the darkness to help her, come at her cry like some gallant of romance.

"Take me where you like, sir," she said saucily.

The man was Colonel Blood, and as a matter of course, he took her to bed. With him began the second stage of her education. She had thought she already knew the world and its ways; but this man, she found, had something fresh to teach her. For the first time she realized the meaning of power—real power, that is, as distinct from the mere play of beauty upon lust. True, it was only a power of the underworld, but to her its significance was tremendous. Day by day she had set before her a lesson that she was peculiarly fitted to learn—of the joy there is in controlling one's fellow creatures.

The ramifications of Blood's influence were endless. It was his boast that there had been no plot for the last ten years of which he did not know every detail, and he exploited his knowledge to the full. Many a poor gentleman of the court came to curry favor with Henrietta at his bidding; noblemen presented her to their wives and daughters; high officers of state invited her to their houses. She adopted the style and title of Madame la Comtesse de Lancey, and as such became for a while a prominent figure in London society. Her beauty, her insolence of wit and manner, and the magnificence of her attire rivaled those of my Lady Castlemaine. To be sure, no one supposed her to be virtuous, but neither was my Lady Castlemaine.

Then, as abruptly as it had begun, her period of glory ceased. Blood left her one day—to rescue some friend who had fallen into the hands of the military,

she was told—and never came back. He parted from her at Barnet, and she went quietly back to London to await his return. The days lengthened into weeks, the weeks into months, and still he did not come. Vague rumors reached her—of a fight on the North Road, wherein he had killed ten of the King's soldiers, of his being in Scotland with the outlawed Covenanters and with the Prince of Orange in the Low Countries—but no message ever came from him.

At last she made up her mind that he would never return. It was a hard fact for her to face, for it meant the loss of all her influence. Now that Blood was gone, there was no longer any need for his victims to court and caress her. And there was more than that. In her loneliness she constantly found herself thinking of Blood the man. It was weak of her to do so, and she knew it. In a life such as hers the essential was forgetfulness. But the memory and the thoughts persisted, nevertheless. She did not even take unto herself a new lover.

There was a harder ordeal yet in store, however. After a lapse of more than two years, she suddenly heard that Blood was back again in London. Whereupon she straightway sent him word of her whereabouts, and awaited his coming, wild with excitement.

He did not come, and her message received no reply. As before, the days lengthened into weeks, the weeks into months. And Madame la Comtesse, besides being an erring and ambitious woman, became also a bitter one.

Such was her frame of mind when into her chaste apartment on College Hill were shown one evening Captain Downing and Mr. Christopher Hallam. She received them graciously, but with a faint hint of surprise. She led a very retired life in these days, and it was unusual for gentlemen to visit her after dark.

"What do you wish, messieurs?" she asked. Her voice, with its pretty French accent, was as delightful as her person.

"Madame!" Downing was all deferential politeness. His bow could not have been deeper, his flourish more pronounced, had she been the Queen of England. And Henrietta, smiling sweetly, merely reflected that he must want something of her—something important. Truth to tell, she was less interested in him than in Christopher. An honest, pleasant looking lad, she thought; country bred, probably, and not yet spoiled by London and its vices.

Christopher, for his part, gazed at her with wonder and awe. Viewed in that place of rose-colored lights, she seemed to reduce all the other women he had ever seen, even Nancy Edwards, to the commonplace. It was not merely her beauty; there was something aloof and mysterious about her, as though the sex secrets of all the ages had been entrusted to her keeping.

"What is it you wish, messieurs?" she asked again when they had accepted her permission to be seated.

"We wish—er—" Downing cleared his throat—"we wish to discuss a matter of business with you."

"Business?" She raised her eyebrows. "I don't understand, sir."

"Madame is in want of money?" Downing asked bluntly.

She laughed, but her eyes were very watchful.

"In want of money? But who is not? To be sure, I am in want of money. All this—" she waved her hand round the daintily appointed room—"all this costs much. You come to give me money, yes?"

"I come to offer you some, madame."

"How much?"

"Two thousand guineas."

"*Mon Dieu!*" Henrietta drew a deep breath. "It is indeed kind of monsieur. Until this moment I have never seen him, and he offers me two thousand guineas. But, naturally, I am very pleased to accept."

Downing gestured. "There is a condition attached, as madame must have guessed. And it is a condition that she alone can fulfill, or I should not have come to her."

"Yes?" said madame simply. Her brain was working at lightning speed, and already she had some inkling of what was coming.

"Madame is, as I understand, a friend of the gentleman known as Colonel Blood."

Henrietta looked at him fixedly for a moment.

"How did you know that?" she asked. She spoke rather harshly, and there was no longer a trace of a French accent in her voice.

"No matter how—suffice it that we know," Downing said. "You *were* his friend, but now are not," he added meaningfully. "That is why we have ventured to appeal to your kindness."

"From whom do you come?" Henrietta asked sharply. "The Duke of Ormond?"

"From his Grace of Ormond, yes."

"And you wish me to do—what?"

"To bring him here, madame, and—er—well, to apprise us of his coming beforehand."

"To play, in effect, the part of Delilah. . . . How can I bring him here? I have no hold over the man. I haven't set eyes on him for nearly three years."

"But if you wrote him a letter, madame, pleading that you were in want—ill—dying—some such thing as that. He would come then, I think."

Henrietta's lips tightened. Yes, he would come then; she knew he would. She had known it all along, but her pride had forbidden the writing of such a letter. And now, dear God, it had come to this! Her face twisted suddenly, and Christopher, watching, was conscious of an acute spasm of pity.

"We only make the offer, madame," he said. "It is within your power to refuse it."

Downing gestured savagely for silence, and Henrietta gave him a faint flash of a smile. Then she strove to collect her wits. Two thousand guineas! In the case of any other man she would not have hesitated. Her golden rule of life was her own advancement, no matter at what cost or whose. But Colonel Blood?

Why—oh, why—had his kisses not left her cold, as those of other men had? Her face quivered again, and she checked herself fiercely.

She must be composed—cool, calculating, cruel. One could be cruel to oneself, anyhow. Why had the good God, in His wisdom, made her love a bandit who knew not the meaning of the word? Why could she not have loved a decent, honest man like that one opposite her now, he who had just spoken? She felt at that moment that she wanted all kinds of foolish things—quiet walks in country lanes, soft words, endearments that would make her heart glad. Again she had need to steady herself, and it was as though she were crucifying something that screamed.

"You—you offer me two thousand guineas," she said. "But should I ever live to see it? When he found that I had betrayed him—what then?"

"You need not be present, madame," Downing pointed out. "It would be better if you were not. So long as Blood is here, that's all we ask. He'll put up a fight, you may be sure, and it will be no place for a woman. In any case," he went on cunningly, "it is said that Blood never harms a woman. They all run towards him, eh—and the men away from him."

Henrietta was not so sure that Blood never harmed a woman. But it was true enough that they all ran towards him—and she, poor fool, ran with the rest. Probably there were scores of wretched creatures eating out their hearts for him that night, even as she was. Oh, curse him! Curse love! Curse everything!

"Very well," she said, "I will do it. I'll write him a letter, and let you know when I have asked him to come."

She rose and extended her hand. Downing, whatever his feelings, dutifully bent and kissed the perfumed fingertips. Christopher moved to do likewise; and then, to his astonishment, she took him by the shoulders, lifted him up, and kissed him fully and richly on the lips.

"Don't be afraid," she said as he stood staring. "I am an evil woman, but it was an honest kiss."

As soon as they were out of the house Downing burst into excited comment.

"Good Gad, the creature seems to have taken a fancy to you. Curse me, I envy your luck! What a magnificent wench! But dangerous—damnably dangerous. Look at the way she's betraying Blood. Don't you be going for any more of her kisses, my lad, or maybe she'll slip a knife into you. Still, that face! Those eyes! They're worth going miles to see."

Christopher said nothing. He felt slightly abashed, and at the same time profoundly sorry for the woman. But never to his dying day was he to know why she had kissed him.

Henrietta executed her promise at once, before she should have time to repent of having given it. She composed a letter of the kind Downing had suggested and sent it by a servant to Peter Mason's fencing school. Once there, it was out of her hands; she could not recall it, whatever happened. And as soon as the

servant returned she sent him with another letter to Clarendon House. That was all. Her task was done, and nothing remained but to await the issue.

The period of waiting proved desperately hard, however. She remained indoors the whole time, torn by doubt, anxiety, and horror. Her mood changed with every passing minute. At one moment she made up her mind that she would see Blood when he came—throw herself into his arms and confess all—at the next that she would run away and hide. It was as though there were two women within her: the mercenary adventuress who thought only of her two thousand guineas; and the woman who was weak as water, whose soul was in revolt against what she had done.

The former kept the second woman in check—sometimes. Then she would lash herself into a fury against Blood and all his works. What an unspeakable hound the man was! What a black-hearted deceiver! Who could regret the death of such a person? He would be well out of the world—this robber, this blackmailer, this debaucher of women!

She was in one of her tigerish moods when he came. Yet the announcement of his arrival quelled her fury in an instant—filled her with wild agitation. For a moment she thought of refusing to see him, of ordering the servant to send him away. Then she realized that refusal was impossible. He would not go, for one thing; and in any case it was too late. His enemies must be all round the place, and they could not have

failed to see him come. So she had him brought upstairs to her room.

It was ridiculous that she should be stirred by the sight of his masculine grace of body, his strong, handsome face, and flashing dark eyes; but so it was. Standing just inside the door to greet him, she felt like a young girl who sees her first lover.

He smiled, white teeth gleaming, eyes admiring her.

"My beautiful one," he murmured. "But—what's this? You told me you were ill—dying. You must have made a marvelously quick recovery, for I see no sign of it. On my soul, you are lovelier than ever."

Dear God, she thought, that voice—that soft Irish voice! How often had the sound of it thrilled her to ecstasy!

"I—I wanted you," she said unsteadily.

He stepped towards her and took her in his arms. For a moment or two she lay close against him, eagerly responsive to his kisses. Then: "No!" she gasped. "I—oh, let me go."

He released her and moved back. Henrietta was trembling, and her cheeks were white as chalk. An almost uncontrollable desire seized her to throw her arms round his neck, to beg him to stay there and never leave her more. He stood looking down at her, faintly amused, it seemed, by her agitation.

"Well," he said at last. "What is it, my sweet? Why do you repulse me? You are mine. Your eyes tell me as much—your lips. You want me to kiss them. You always want it."

He stretched out his hand and caressed her hair, running his fingers gently across it and down until they touched the soft flesh of her neck.

"You love me," he said. "It's true, isn't it?"

"Yes, I love you," she whispered, and knew that her heart spoke for her. And then looking up into his eyes, she saw that they seemed to have softened, to have lost their usual hard brilliance and become almost tender. There was not much that this man did not know about the cajoling of women.

"Oh, my God!" the wretched Henrietta screamed. "Go—go! I have betrayed you. There are men here to take you—all round the house. Even now I fear it will be too late."

The tenderness in Blood's eyes vanished on the instant. He slipped a hand behind his back, whence it reappeared holding a long sheath knife.

"So?" he said quietly. "That's the meaning of it. I wondered, my dear. It wasn't like you, that letter. But at whose instance have you done it? Ormond's?"

She nodded dumbly, waiting for him to kill her.

"And for money?" he asked. "How much?"

"T-two thousand guineas."

"Lord above! Two thousand? His Grace grows generous in his old age. All the same, my dear—" he shook his head—"you oughtn't to have done it."

He held the knife poised in his hand. Henrietta saw it, but it hardly concerned her. She did not mind whether he killed her or not; all she wanted was for him to go. He stood looking at her, marking the place

where he would strike. Between the breasts, he thought, with a slight left twist of the knife to make sure of reaching the heart.

Nobody had ever played him false and lived to tell the tale. It was, in his eyes, the unforgivable sin. And yet—she was a beautiful woman. He ran his eyes over her figure, the shape of her shoulders, the sweep of her silken gown. On the curve of her bosom lay a diamond clasp that he himself had given her, and he could see it rising and falling—up and down, up and down—the diamonds winking and flashing with each agonized breath.

"Oh, do go!" she cried. "Kill me and go! Do you want them to take you?"

He gave a curious little laugh, and thrust the knife back into its sheath.

"Calm yourself, my dear," he said. "I wouldn't kill you for the world. And have no fears on my account, either. They won't take me; no man living could take me. I am Colonel Blood." And he clasped her in his arms again. "Oh, my beautifull" he murmured, his mouth on hers.

From below came the sound of a door being opened, and the trampling of many feet.

By the time Blood reached the house, his enemies had been waiting outside in the cold and darkness for nearly two hours. Including the two leaders, the party numbered fourteen—a motley crew—some of them Ormond's retainers, some friends and acquaintances of Downing, and some mere hired mercenaries.

The only possible exits from the house were at the front and at the back; its two sides were securely walled in by its neighbors. Half of the men, therefore, were stationed in the back yard, and the remainder in front, on College Hill. Those behind were ordered to crouch down under the shadow of the wall; those in front were scattered at judicious intervals along the street in doorways and dark corners. All these arrangements were made long before the time arrived, and thereafter Christopher and Downing constantly did the rounds to make sure that everyone was in position and alert.

Christopher, for his part, found it a dull, cold business. He had not liked the idea in the first place, and what little zest he had for it, the long wait in the darkness effectually removed. As time passed he began to think that Blood was not coming at all—and he was not sure that he wanted him to, either. At last, however, the watchers in front saw a tall figure stalk past them, hammer loudly on the door of the house, and be admitted by a servant.

"There's our man," Christopher whispered in Downing's ear.

"Ay, I think so. Wait!"—Christopher had taken a hasty step forward—"Steady, man, Lord's sake! Go and get the fellows together in the street. Have them in a body outside the door. I'll go and give them the word at the back. When we're ready I'll sound a whistle. Then we'll enter together—front door and back. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I understand. D'ye mean to take him alive?"

"Alive or dead, I don't care, so long as we make an end of him." Downing was gritting his teeth with excitement. "This is the moment I've been waiting for, my lad, for the last ten years. If he escapes us now, by God, I'll go and hang myself. You're positive you understand?"

So far as Christopher was concerned the arrangements went off without a hitch. He assembled his party in front, and presently there came to his ears a low whistle. The door was not even locked, and an instant later they were in the hall. It was lighted by an ornamental lamp hanging from the ceiling, and he could see it all distinctly—the two doors in the right-hand wall, the staircase on the left. Through one of the doors a terrified maid-servant peeped forth; from above stairs came a loud, reckless laugh; and from the back a sound of irregular hammering and wild shouts of "Open!"

The back door, unlike the front, must be locked, Christopher reflected—and that was the last reflection for which he had time. At the head of the stairs a pistol roared, and simultaneously the lamp which lighted the hall was extinguished, plunging them into darkness. After the first pistol shot came a second, and one of the men beside him gave a horrid, bubbling cry and toppled slowly over backwards.

Then, it seemed to him, all hell broke loose. Everybody began to shout and to run this way and that, without rhyme or reason. Pistols were discharged by

his own party, one of them unpleasantly close to his ear. He called for a light, but nobody heard him. In any case, nobody knew where a light was to be found.

"Up the stairs!" a hoarse voice bawled. "Up the stairs to him, damn your eyes! That's where he is."

And Christopher, deeming the advice good, plunged blindly towards the place where he imagined the stairs to be. After knocking one man down, narrowly escaping impalement on the sword of another, and banging his head against the wall, he found himself stumbling over the bottom step. Someone else was there before him, and he raced upward in the man's wake.

At the top of the stairs was a landing, and there Christopher dragged the other to a halt.

"Carefull!" he yelled. "We may be on him any moment. Curse it, if only we had a light!"

The landing was as black as the hall below, save that some distance ahead a faint, infinitesimal thread of light shone beneath a closed door. At all costs, Christopher thought, they must get that door open. He edged himself up alongside the other man, and they advanced together step by step, swords outthrust, every muscle tensed for instant action. The uproar below, meanwhile, seemed to grow louder. More voices were lending their clamor to it than before, and once or twice Christopher fancied he heard that of Downing. The party at the back must have got in somehow, after all.

Suddenly, between himself and that faint thread of

light beneath the door, Christopher saw something move. The man beside him saw it too, and hurled himself forward, hacking and slashing wildly. And then, cutting through the roar of masculine voices like a knife-thrust, came the awful scream of a woman. It rose and fell, rose again more weakly, and died away at last in a thin wail like that of a stricken child.

There followed a silence, more appalling in its way than all that had gone before. Not a man spoke or stirred. Christopher felt the hair on his head tingle.

"God!" the man beside him muttered at last. "It was a woman. And I've killed her—run her through. I didn't know it, as God's my witness."

Heedless of whether he met Blood or not, Christopher ran forward and opened the door. A bar of light fell across the landing, and in the middle he saw a huddled figure lying. He bent over it, staring. It was indeed a woman—she who a few days before had kissed him on the lips. Her beautiful face was twisted in agony; there was a bloody froth around her mouth; and beside her a dark stream spread slowly across the floor.

The next thing Christopher knew was that Downing was clutching him by the arm.

"Where's Blood, confound it? Where the devil has he got to?"

Christopher gestured to the still form at his feet.

"The woman," he said. "She is dead. It's Madame de—"

"A pox on the woman!" Downing cried furiously.

Then he checked himself. "Nay, poor soul, I don't mean that. But where is he, man? Where's Blood?"

That was the question: where *was* Blood? And it was a question that remained unanswered. Though they got lights and searched the house from cellar to garret, they found never a trace of him. Only the broken lamp in the hall and the dead man lying beneath it remained to show that he had ever been there. When they entered the place he was at the head of the stairs—they were positive of it. Yet when they went up to find him he was gone.

The thing was incomprehensible, uncanny. It was as though he were in league with the powers of darkness, and could vanish into thin air.

When Henrietta uttered her death cry, Blood was crouching in the shelter of an alley some fifty yards away, softly chuckling to himself. There had been nothing miraculous about his escape—nothing even remarkable about it, from his own point of view. Yet it was an escape that would only have been possible to a man of his abnormal audacity and self-confidence.

When he heard his enemies enter the hall, he went out of the room in which he had been caressing his lady-love and onto the landing. Henrietta, against his will, followed him there, and so, as it turned out, went to her death. From the head of the stairs he fired his two shots, one to extinguish the lamp, the other at random into the crowd.

Under cover of the confusion which followed, he

darted halfway down the stairs, swung himself over the banister, and dropped into the hall. An instant later he was in the midst of his enemies—one of themselves, for all they knew. To complete the illusion, he shouted with the rest. It was his voice that Christopher had heard ordering him to mount the stairs. And while he struggled to do so, Blood had slipped quietly out into the street. It had been easy; the door stood open, and no one had thought of guarding it.

And now hiding in the alley and chuckling, he heard his inamorata's death cry. For a while it sobered him. To be sure, the cry might equally well have been uttered by a maid-servant, but he knew in his heart that it had not. As well as if he had been there to see, he knew that it was Henrietta who had screamed, and he knew that she was dead.

A mood of rare sentimentality swept over him. She had been a beautiful woman, and, Gad, how she had loved him. That was her trouble; she had loved him too well. She had been easy, too easy, and in time it had wearied him. He needed the spice of resistance to stimulate his interest in a woman. Still, he had been a fool to give her up—a very fool.

He shook his head sadly, and for a moment there were almost tears in his eyes. Then, as quickly as it had come, his softer mood passed. He jerked himself upright and spat out an oath. She was dead, damn her—let her rest! There were plenty more. A woman was only a woman, and he was Colonel Blood.

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## T E N

### *Terror By Night*

CHRISTOPHER never forgot the horror of that night. It was the first time that he had seen a woman killed, and he devoutly hoped that it would be the last.

At about three in the morning, weary, and so savage in temper as to be almost at each other's throats, he and Downing arrived back at Clarendon House. There, of course, they found my Lord Ossory waiting to hear the news, and the whole thing had to be talked over and argued afresh.

"Lord sakes!" Ossory said. "You killed the woman? The Comtesse? There'll be the devil to pay about that! An inquiry—heaven knows what. It will have to be explained to the magistrates."

"It was the purest accident, my Lord," Downing protested.

"Who killed her?"

"Hawkins—one of our own men."

"The deuce! Well, it may have been an accident—no doubt it was—but it looks damned bad. My father will be dev'lishly annoyed. People will say you murdered her out of spite, you see, because Blood escaped you. And I can't help thinking, Downing, that the

affair was mismanaged. How did you let him escape?"

"I didn't, my Lord," Downing said, dangerously quiet. "He was gone before I set foot in the house. The woman was dead before I reached her, too."

"And why," Christopher demanded taking fire at the suggestion that he was to blame, "why weren't you in the house sooner?"

"You know why. The door was locked, and we had to break in through one of the windows."

"That's no reason!" Christopher banged his fist down on the table. "You made the arrangements. Half of us were to go in at the front and half at the back—you decided it. Why didn't you find out whether the door was locked? Did you suppose all the doors in the house would stand open for your convenience? Or maybe you thought it safer to skulk in the back yard and leave the handling of Blood to me."

"That," said Downing deliberately, "is a damned lie—and you know it."

Christopher sprang to his feet, fumbling for his sword, but before he could say another word Ossory intervened.

"Sit down!" he said sharply. "Sit down, Hallam! Will you obey me, sir, or must I have you thrown out? . . . Your tempers are on edge," he went on when Christopher had subsided, "and I don't wonder at it. It's the most infernal business I ever heard of. You've no idea, either of you, how he got away?"

They shook their heads.

"H'm," said Ossory. "Well, what my father's going

to say, Lord knows. He'll have to be told; we can't hide it. If we'd taken Blood, he might have been content to let the end justify the means. But with this dead woman on our hands there's no chance of that."

"Where is his Grace?" Christopher asked.

"At Greenwich tonight. He is in attendance on the Prince of Orange, who landed there today. Tomorrow they come to London, and in the evening I shall have to break the news to him. It will be I who'll get the blame, mind, for allowing you to do it. And now away you go to bed, the pair of you. In the morning you'll be the best of friends again."

There was an inquiry into the matter, but it attracted less attention than might have been expected. For the next four or five days all London was in a turmoil over the presence of the Prince of Orange. Tumultuous crowds followed him wherever he went, and the noise of their bellowing was audible over the whole city. To Christopher he was the merest name, but he understood that his amazing popularity was connected with matters religious.

The present king had no children—or no legitimate children—so that the heir to the throne was his brother, the Duke of York. And the Duke of York was that horrid, hateful, and inexplicable thing, a Papist. When he became king, the whole of the country would promptly disappear under the heel of the Pope—or so Christopher gathered from the talk that he heard in taverns.

It was a dire prospect, but there was one bright

spot to lighten the gloom. With the best will in the world the Duke of York could not live forever, and his daughters, the Princesses Mary and Anne, were both Protestants. There thus existed a hope that, at some period in the remote future, the country might emerge from beneath the Pope's heel and rise again—crushed and bruised, no doubt, but still in being. And it was felt that this hope was enhanced by the fact that the Prince of Orange, himself a stout Protestant, was contracted to marry the Princess Mary. Which, almost entirely, accounted for the popular enthusiasm. The prince was not loved for himself—he was, indeed, a singularly unlovable person—but for the salutary effect he might have on the minions of the Pope.

To Christopher it all seemed a great ado about nothing. The present king showed no signs of dying yet, so far as he knew. There was even time for him to beget a son and heir; he was a man of barely forty, and noted for his skill with the ladies. As for the Pope—be hanged to him! Honest Englishmen would never again bow their necks to Rome.

Be that as it may, however, the little Dutchman was undoubtedly the hero of the hour. Even at Whitehall, where there was a large Catholic faction that was hostile to him, vast celebrations were made in his honor. There was feasting in the banquet hall, and dancing afterwards in the royal gallery; the king was his most gracious self; the ladies were lavish in the display of their charms; and noble gentlemen got

nobly drunk. And through it all, with Ormond in attendance, the prince went like an automaton, pallid of face, stiff, and awkward, returning the same mechanical smile to the provocations of the king's mistresses as to the thinly veiled insults of the court wits.

On the morrow there was another function, in the Guild Hall this time, where the bigwigs of the City of London did the prince honor. This again was an awe-inspiring ceremony, though quite different from the one that preceded it. The city prided itself on being free from the vices and frivolities of the Court. There was plenty to eat and drink, indeed, but no dancing or polite social intercourse. In their place was interminable speechifying. The city fathers were Protestants to a man, and the prince's presence was very welcome to them. Unfortunately, they could think of no better way of letting him know it than by telling him so one by one, in the most redundant manner possible—and, it must be added, in a language which he barely understood.

As a result, the entertainment lasted until a late hour. It was nearly midnight when the party broke up, and some time after that before Ormond, having safely disposed of his charge, was able to call for his carriage and go home. The night was not very dark, but wild and blustery, and withal exceedingly cold, with a suspicion of snow in the air. The duke shivered as he got into his carriage.

"Home," he said, "as quick as you can. It's no night for a dog to be out."

His Grace settled himself down with a sigh of satisfaction, wrapping his cloak tightly round him. He found this succession of functions rather trying. It was a great honor, no doubt, to be chosen as the young prince's guide and mentor, but for a man of over sixty, it had its attendant disadvantages. He fell into thought, mainly concerning the woman who had been killed two nights ago. It worried him, that affair; he felt that it was a disgrace to the name of Ormond. The fact that they had to fight Blood was no excuse for descending to his methods.

The carriage, meanwhile, went on its way. Its speed in the dark streets seldom exceeded a walk, and the servants without had little need to exercise their fleetness of foot. Occasionally, when his eyes were attracted by the glare of a passing bearer's torch, his Grace glanced out of the window. There was little to be seen; the streets presented the forlorn aspect usual on a cold winter's night. Presently, however, something happened which made him look out more carefully. From both sides of the road a confused outcry arose—oaths and ejaculations, loud-voiced commands to clear the way, and threats of rolling in the gutter. It was difficult to see what was amiss, but so far as he could make out his footmen had fallen afoul of some party of drunken revelers who were disputing their right of passage. It was odd that the revelers should

be occupying both sides of the road, he thought, and was of two minds about stopping the carriage.

He felt tired, however, and in no mood for interfering in a street brawl. Moreover, the dim shapes of the buildings on either hand told him that he was near the end of St. James' Street, not five minutes' walk from Clarendon House. As near to home as that his footmen ought to be able to take care of themselves, surely. There were half a dozen of them, stout fellows every one, and Irishmen, who could be relied on to put up a fight. He sat still, therefore, and allowed the carriage to go on. The sounds of altercation grew fainter behind him, and at last died away. Then, all at once and suddenly, something else happened.

"Hold there!" a deep voice roared. "Would ye ride us down, curse ye? Stop, by God! Or I'll give ye a bellyful of lead."

The carriage stopped so abruptly that the duke was almost thrown out of his seat. Before he had time to recover himself the door was open, and the muzzle of a pistol thrust beneath his nose. The unexpectedness of it took his breath away, and he could only sit and gasp. Behind the man with the pistol he saw others, some afoot and some on horseback. How many they were he could not tell, but the carriage seemed to be surrounded by them. One of them was carrying a small lantern, the light of which gleamed unpleasantly on their sinister array of weapons. Every man that he could see was armed to the teeth.

The duke's first impression was that he was being attacked by highwaymen. It was unusual, however, for highwaymen to commit their depredations in the middle of London. Nor were so many of them generally to be found together; as a rule they hunted singly or in couples. Anyhow, his Grace reflected, they would get very little for their trouble, for the amount of money that he had on him was negligible.

"What's this?" he began; but he got no further. The man with the pistol seized him by the shoulder, and displaying a prodigious strength of arm, jerked him out of his seat and halfway through the carriage door.

"Here, Tom, bring the light this way!" he ordered. "Let's have a look at him, and make sure he's the right man. We don't want to hang the wrong one."

The man with the lantern came forward and held it up close to the duke's face. The other—he who held his Grace's shoulder—gave a savage laugh.

"It's Ormond!" he cried. "We have him at last, my bullies."

The light had revealed his face also, boldly handsome, dark of eye and white of tooth.

"Blood?" the duke said. "Colonel Blood?"

"Ay, Colonel Blood," the man replied. "I'm flattered that your Grace should recognize me after so many years. It's nearly ten, isn't it, since you hanged poor Tim Leckie in Dublin? Ah, you call it to mind, I see. And I've another bone to pick with you. You murdered a woman of mine the other day."

He shook the duke to and fro until his teeth rattled, and ended by dragging him out of the carriage on to the roadway. Then he issued a number of commands to his subordinates.

"At him, some of you—don't stand gaping, lads. Tie him up as I told you. You, Garvey, let loose the horses and turn them adrift. You've settled with the coachman, I hope? . . . Hal! Would you, Ormond?" The duke had made an attempt to draw his sword. "Try that again, and I'll break your shoulder bone. Take his knife away from him, somebody, and—"

"What do you want with me?" Ormond asked quietly. "There's no need to bind me, surely. I can hardly escape—one old man from the midst of so many. If you mean to kill me, do it now. But at least let me die with my limbs unbound."

While he spoke, the gang closed in on him. His sword was taken away, and Blood seized him by the throat and hurled him to the ground. As he lay there, gasping for breath, a gag was thrust between his teeth and knotted at the back of his head. Then his elbows were tied tightly together behind his back, and the loose end of the rope passed several times round his waist. His legs were thus left free, and he was still able to turn his head, but the rest of him was rendered fixed and immovable. All the time he heard Blood talking to him, softly and gently—in the way a cat, could it speak, might talk to a mouse.

"You want to know my purpose, Ormond? Well, I'll tell you it. I'm going to kill you, as you said. But

not here, and not by the knife or the bullet. You won't die so easily. You hanged Tim Leckie—hung, drew, and quartered him. And I'm going to do the same to you, except that I shall leave out the quartering. I'd sooner have you hanging whole, so that everybody will know you. They'll find you on Tyburn Gallows tomorrow morning. It will be a rare sight for your son Ossory, eh? And think how your enemies will rejoice! His Grace of Buckingham, he above all. It's by his good offices that I've caught you here. He has been keeping me informed about you these last three weeks. Can you hear me, my Lord?"

All at once there came an interruption, and the duke had a faint spark of hope. The stationary carriage and the crowd of men around it had already attracted attention, but hitherto those who had seen them had deemed it prudent to pass by and ask no questions. Now, however, someone less circumspect had arrived.

"What's to do here?" an authoritative voice demanded. "Out of the way, knaves—you block the road."

"Nay, stand back, sir—stand back, by your good leave," Blood replied instantly. "It's Dick Ryder, sir, the noted Toby. Took him red-handed, we did, robbing this gentleman's carriage. . . . Douse the light, Tom, you fool!" he added under his breath.

"But, Gad's life, man! You take up the whole road, and I want to pass," the voice replied angrily.

"Then you must turn round, sir, and go some

other way. If you come a step nearer I'll order my men to fire. He's a curst slippery rogue, and we've no mind for a rescue."

"You damned catchpoll! D'ye know to whom you're speaking?"

"I know my orders, sir," Blood said, "and they're that I'm to fire on all who interfere. And I'll do it, if it were on the king himself."

"The devil! Who gave you such orders?"

"Why, his Worship the Sheriff. If you've any complaints to make, go and make them to him."

The angry gentleman made a few pungent remarks on the officiousness of thief-takers, and then apparently turned round and went the other way. There was a *klip-klop* of horses' hooves and a rumbling of wheels, and after that the duke heard no more of him.

Presently he was hauled to his feet, raised aloft in Blood's powerful arms, and plumped down astride the rump of a horse. Someone was in the saddle already, and behind this person he was securely bound, waist to waist and leg to leg. Finally a cloak was draped over him, so that it covered even his head. For a moment that puzzled him, but he soon divined the reason for it. In the darkness, the two of them would now pass for one; it would appear as though there were but a single person on the horse—a hump-backed and misshapen person, no doubt, but still only one man. His enemies were leaving nothing to chance.

"Now," said Blood's voice behind him, "away with him, Tom. Not too fast, lad; go slow, and you'll attract less notice. He can't make a sound with that gag in his mouth, and you have the others beside you if he gives any trouble. I'm going on ahead, to make ready the rope. D'ye hear, my Lord?" He dug the duke playfully in the ribs. "I'm going to get the rope ready for you."

Ormond's chief feeling on receiving that information was relief. It meant that his arch enemy would be absent for a while. The other rogues were less formidable, and though his chance of escape was still of the slenderest, hope again stirred within him. And just then, one of those around said something which showed that even Colonel Blood's plans did not always go right.

"Hey! Where's the coachman? He's slipped off, by God!"

"Death and damnation!" Blood said. "That was your work, Garvey. I told you to knock him on the head."

"And so I did," Garvey protested. "I left him on the ground as if he was dead."

"He's not there now, anyway. It's always the same. Unless I do a thing myself—Hark! What's that?"

They all listened, and in the ensuing silence the duke heard a distant sound of voices, as of several people shouting together. His missing footmen, probably.

"Away!" Blood said urgently. "Once we're clear, they won't know which way to follow. And mind what I said, Tom—not too fast."

The horse on which the duke was mounted started forward at a slow trot, and in the extreme discomfort of riding in this position the duke speedily forgot all else. Bound as he was, he could not adjust himself to the animal's movements, and its progress seemed to him nothing but a series of savage jerks. His arms and shoulders ached abominably, his legs were bruised against the back of the saddle, his bonds cut into his flesh, and the gag that was in his mouth well nigh choked him. His captor also seemed to be suffering some discomfort, for he changed his position several times, and at last turned and addressed the duke over his shoulder.

"Sit still, man, or I'll give you a crack over the head to quiet you. What's the sense of wriggling? Can't you go to your death like a man? Hey, Garvey, not so fast, fool! I wish you had him instead of me."

Ormond could not have sat still if he would, and certainly would not if he could. His only chance of being rescued lay in delaying his captors. Since the coachman had escaped, he had presumably given the alarm, but it would be some time before his friends could overtake him. First they must find out where he was, and that alone might take them half the night. The last place where they would look for him was on the road to Tyburn.

There was but one way of causing a delay, and

that was by throwing himself off the horse. It would be a dangerous game to play; he might be trampled to death by the animal's hooves, and, failing that, the rogues would probably pistol him. But he was determined to try it. Any fate was preferable to being hanged.

It was no easy thing to do, however. He could not throw himself off without taking the other man with him, and the latter was not only taller and heavier than he, but supported by the saddle and stirrups to boot. Three times he tried, at the cost of excruciating agony to his bound limbs, and three times failed. In return for his pains he received a shower of blows from his captor, delivered backwards with a riding whip. And as though that were not enough, one of the others rode up behind and pricked him with the point of a knife.

"Easy, my Lord," said he. "No more of that, or I'll slit you up like a herring. You'd hang just the same, mind; it wouldn't save you. The hanging should come before the drawing, by rights, but we can have 'em the other way about. Those that find you in the morning will be none the wiser."

Sheer exhaustion, rather than fear of what might be done to him, compelled the duke to relax his efforts. Meanwhile he tried to think. There must be some way of overthrowing the man. The first thing, he decided, was to get his feet out of the stirrups. Since his own feet were closely attached to them, that might be accomplished by jerking his legs backwards—if he

had but the strength to jerk hard enough. He must succeed at the first attempt, however, for the man would see to it that he did not get another.

For a while he rested—if that word can be applied to one situated as he was. Then, making a mighty effort, he jerked back his legs. They moved, both of them, the left rather more than the right; and on that side he felt his captor's foot slip from the stirrup. To the left, therefore, he knew that he must throw himself. He did so, pressing himself off with the right leg and casting his whole weight sideways.

He heard his captor utter a cry, felt him heave and strain as he fought to retain his balance. He leaned over farther, and yet farther—and slowly, like the fall of a tree, he felt the man coming.

There was a storm of oaths all round him, and somebody struck at his head with a pistol. But he cared not, for he knew that he had succeeded. They were falling . . .

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## E L E V E N

### *Duel to the Death*

THAT same evening, as it happened, Christopher went out to Knightsbridge. It was the first time that he had been there, and he had a particular reason for going. Among his friends and acquaintances in Yorkshire there was one, and only one, who was in the habit of journeying so far afield as London. That was a certain Mr. Thomas Woodhead, a woolen vendor, part of whose business consisted of selling Yorkshire homespuns to the London tailors. And one of the last things that Christopher had done before leaving home was to arrange to meet Mr. Woodhead when next that gentleman came to London. The woolen vendor was to obtain his address from the lawyer in Sheffield and let him know of his arrival. So that, having that day received a message that Woodhead was to be found at the "Nag's Head," in Knightsbridge, Christopher went there to see him.

He went on foot, and dressed in his oldest clothes. For that, again, there was a reason. He did not wish the Yorkshire people to think he was too prosperous in London, else they might not want him back again. He also intended to assume a depressed air, and to make his stay a short one. But before he had been

five minutes in Woodhead's company that was forgotten, and they were "Tom" and "Master Chris" to each other, just as when Woodhead was bargaining for his father's wool in the barn at home. After nearly six months' sojourn in London, it was a joy to hear the broad Yorkshire speech again, and to listen to intimate details of Squire This and Farmer That, whom he had known since boyhood. The news from Fulwood was bad—or good, according to the point of view. Brother Robert was failing fast. He seldom left his bedroom now, and was not expected to live for more than another few months.

"He's always in pain," Woodhead said, "day and night. I ain't seen him myself, but they say he's like a livin' skeleton—no flesh left on his bones."

Christopher was moved, genuinely moved. He made up his mind to write his brother a letter of reconciliation at once. He had never really disliked Robert, and it was terrible that the man should lie in agony thinking that he was waiting to step into his shoes.

What with one thing and another, it was past midnight when he bade farewell to the vendor of woollens and set out to return to his lodging. The night was bitterly cold, and he now regretted not having brought a horse. In consequence of the weather, the road was almost deserted, and during the first part of his journey he hardly saw a soul. As he approached the neighborhood of Berkeley House, however, he became aware that a body of horsemen was coming

to meet him. They were a very noisy party, so much so that he paused and examined his weapons.

It soon became clear that the horsemen had no hostile intent—or none towards him, at any rate. They seemed more disposed to fight each other. Their behavior was so peculiar, indeed, that when they came abreast of him Christopher stopped to watch them. One of them, the center of the disturbance, was an immensely stout man, so stout that Christopher marveled that his horse could carry him. In the darkness he appeared gigantic, misshapen—a monster. This person was not only shouting and cursing in the most alarming manner, but was also swaying to and fro in his saddle as though he were drunk. His companions were as noisy as himself, and while one of them seemed to be making some attempt to hold him upright, the others were striking at him with their riding-whips.

Presently the inevitable happened—the man fell off his horse. Christopher had an indistinct vision of his arms waving in the air, and then down he went, plump on to the muddy roadway. It was a nasty fall; but he seemed little the worse for it, for he continued to curse and remonstrate with unabated vigor.

“Unloose these straps, one of you!” Christopher heard him cry. “By the devil and all his angels! If you don’t . . .”

His remarks were presumably addressed to the others, but they paid no heed to them. It was a case of all talkers and no listeners—as near an approach

to bedlam as Christopher had ever seen. Who the men were, or what they were about, he could form no idea; and at last he determined to go forward and look. By the time he reached the scene of action, two others had dismounted, and one was bending over the fellow who lay floundering on the ground.

"Get him up again, Tom, for God's sake!" he shouted. "The colonel will cut our throats for this."

"Then give me a hand, curse ye!" he on the ground retorted. "Loose these damnable straps! How can I get up till ye do that? Loose them, fool—loose them!"

"Straps?" Christopher wondered. "What straps?"

When he drew nearer to look, his amazement was redoubled. For he saw that there was not one man on the ground, but two, bound tightly together from breast to ankle. They were lying one on top of the other, he who had just spoken being the uppermost. His companion had evidently borne the brunt of the fall from the horse, for he lay as if dead, making neither sound nor movement. At the same moment as Christopher discovered this, one of those who had dismounted became aware of his presence.

"The devil!" he ejaculated. "Who are you? Away—be off about your business! Hey, Garvey! Bestir yourself—ha!"

He made a grab for his weapons, but Christopher was too quick for him. Jerking out his pistol—which, since he had no horse, he was carrying stuck in his belt—he drove the muzzle hard into the man's face. The fellow went staggering backwards, and without

waiting to see what became of him, Christopher turned his attention to the pair on the ground. The more active of them was still continuing his vociferations.

"Hell and fury! Will ye unloose these accursed straps? . . . Here, you!"—this was addressed to Christopher—"Set me free from these straps, for the love of God!"

Christopher tried to reply, but he was not given the time. Something cannoned into him from behind—the rump of a horse, he fancied—and he fell sprawling on top of the man. His pistol went off, and his hat rolled in the mud; the man beneath him heaved and twisted, clawing at him with his hands and cursing at the top of his voice. Ere he could regain his feet, another pistol was discharged, and he heard the bullet strike the ground within a few inches of his head.

After that, confusion was worse confounded. Men shouted, horses screamed, and shot after shot was fired, apparently at random. Christopher sprang up, and straightway found himself entangled with a horse again. He was thrown off his feet a second time, and only escaped being trampled by clinging to the animal's neck. Before he recovered his balance, he had been dragged fifteen or twenty yards, and his career ended by his being flung against a wall.

He looked round him rather dazedly. The first thing that met his eye was two or three of the rogues running away. The horses had already gone, and he

could not at first make out in which direction the two men on the ground lay. He noticed that the uproar was beginning to attract attention, however. Some distance away he saw a man with a torch approaching, and other shadowy figures were hovering in the background.

Having recovered his breath, he started forward again. He soon found the two men on the ground, but, lo and behold, just as he reached them, the uppermost of the pair made his escape from the other! Whether he unloosed the straps himself, or whether someone performed that office for him, Christopher never knew. Nor did he waste time in considering it. For the first thing the man did on gaining his feet was to take a pistol from his belt and point it at his fellow-captive.

"It's too late to hang ye, my Lord," he said. "I'll do your business here, and chance it."

Happily for the unfortunate man at his feet, he dwelt for a moment on his aim. Christopher had lost his pistol during the struggle with the horse, and to draw his sword there was no time. He did the only thing possible—sprang forward and knocked the muzzle of the man's weapon upward with his hand. As he touched it, the would-be murderer fired. His bullet took effect, but not upon its intended victim. It passed over and beyond him, and there was a cry of pain from among the crowd of onlookers, some thirty or forty yards away.

The man turned on Christopher savagely, strik-

ing at him with the butt of the pistol. He was a tall, powerfully built fellow, and the first shock of his attack drove Christopher back. As soon as he was able to draw his sword, however, the tables were turned. His adversary withdrew as quickly as he had advanced, and after a moment's hesitation took to his heels and ran.

Christopher did not pursue him, but turned to where the other man still lay on the ground. Stooping low over him, he peered into his face. It was too dark for him to distinguish the features, but he saw that the man was elderly, and judging by his dress, a person of importance. His coat was of fine material and fashionable cut, and the stars of several orders gleamed on his breast. He saw something else, too—that the man was gagged, and his hands were tied together behind his back. Standing astride him, he tried to unloose the bonds, but in vain. The knots were too many for him to cope with in the darkness; all that he could do was to take out the gag, whereupon the unknown gave a feeble groan.

Remembering that he had seen a man with a torch, Christopher looked round to find where he was. He was standing with the rest of the onlookers, holding it up in an attempt to pierce the gloom. The crowd around him was now fifteen or twenty strong, and was rapidly growing larger. All of them peered and muttered, but one of their number, having already paid dear for his curiosity, none ventured to come nearer.

"Ho, there!" Christopher cried. "You, with the light, come this way. There's a wounded man lying on the road. The rest of you had better come, too. I may need your help."

"Ay, and there's a wounded man here," someone replied sourly. "Shot in the arm, he is, and hardly able to stand up."

Christopher was relieved to hear that it was no worse.

"There'll be no more shooting," he told them. "The rogues who would have killed this gentleman are gone. Come quickly, and we may save his life."

A moment later, however, his assurance of safety was shown to be premature. The linkman had barely reached him—the light, indeed, had never actually been shone on the victim's face—before there came an interruption.

"What's to do here?" a jovial voice roared. "Out of my way, friends! Out of my way, I say!"

"It's Colonel Blood!" somebody cried in fright. "There's but one voice in England the like of that. It's the colonel himself, I swear."

At the sound of that name the crowd surged quickly back. Others took up the cry: "Colonel Blood! Colonel Blood!" And presently Christopher saw him—a great, swaggering figure of a man, clad in what appeared to be a sinister caricature of the prevailing mode. The sinister element was obtained by his choice of colors. His doublet was black, slashed with red; his mantle was scarlet within and black without;

a collar of crimson lace covered his chest, and crimson also, as though stained with blood, were the ruffles that overhung his black-gloved hands.

"Did I hear someone mention my name?" he laughed. "Colonel Blood, eh? That's right, Colonel Blood it is. There's a reward of five hundred guineas for me—five hundred guineas, dead or alive. If any man would care to earn it, why, here I am. I can't speak you fairer than that, now, can I? Five hundred guineas, friends! Doesn't it tempt any of you?"

All the time he was speaking he drew steadily nearer, so that Christopher could see him more and more distinctly. The one member of the crowd who did not retreat, fortunately, was the torchbearer, and they still had light upon the scene. As the others moved away, Christopher became visible, standing with the bound man between his legs. It was the last who arrested Blood's attention.

"Ahal!" he cried, stepping forward more quickly. "My good friend Ormond, I declare. There'll still be time to quarter him, if not to hang him."

Christopher could hardly believe his ears. Ormond? The duke? Was it he who lay there on the ground? Great God in Heaven! He went to meet Blood, teeth clenched and sword in hand.

"Stop!" he said. "Wait a moment, sir. What's your business?"

"Stand back, you—" Blood began, and then stopped short. He bent forward and peered into Christopher's face. "Why, by the beard of Beelzebub,

it's Peter Mason's friend!" he said, and began to laugh.

"On guard!" Christopher cried savagely. "On guard, or I'll run you through. You asked a moment ago if anyone wished to earn the reward for your head. You may take it that I do."

"So-o! That's your spirit, is it?" Blood said. "Well, my cock, you shall have your way. I've never refused to fight a man yet, and, God helping me, I never will." He took off his cloak, threw it over his left arm, and drew his sword. "Here!" he said to the linkman. "You stand still—just where you are. And hold your light up, so that we can see what we're about. If you move a step before I give the word, it will be your last. . . Now, my lad, have at it! I'm ready for you."

They engaged without more ado. Christopher remembered what Peter Mason had told him about Colonel Blood, and the instant that their blades touched he knew that his friend's praise had not been too high. Blood was a master swordsman, whatever else he might be. He had the true fencer's poise and balance of body; he had a wrist of steel; his sword, in the uncertain glare of the torch, seemed to flicker to and fro like a flash of forked lightning. Christopher's chief asset was his speed, and, realizing this, he attacked impetuously. Thrice he drove in, but each time, with an ease and economy of effort that astonished him, he was forced to retreat. His opponent, meanwhile, seemed scarcely to have stirred an inch.

"You've some notion of fence, laddie," he remarked when Christopher paused for breath. "And when I say that it means something. I know the way a man should handle a sword. Steady now—steady!" Christopher was pressing him again. "We're fighting, my friend, not having a dancing match. If you skip about in that fashion you'll soon be all flustered and a-sweat. . . . Ha! You nearly had me there. If I hadn't been so discourteous as to parry, you'd have spitted me like a goose."

Furious at seeing his efforts frustrated, Christopher determined to try a ruse which Signor Peter had taught him—a feint at the throat to draw his adversary's guard upwards, a sudden dropping of his point, and then a lunge at the lower part of the body. It was murderous, Peter had said; unless the enemy knew it was coming, there was no counter for it. Christopher put it into execution; lightning could hardly have exceeded the speed of his lunge, and he drove it home with a force that he thought must prove irresistible. But in the nick of time Blood stepped aside—and then continued his running commentary as before.

"Pretty—very pretty! That's an Italian trick. You had it from Peter Mason, eh—and he learned it from me. It has one fault: if it fails, you're lost. I might have pinned you face down in the mud if I'd had a mind to."

After that they paused again, Christopher shaken and out of breath, and his enemy apparently as cool

as ever. In the resulting silence they heard a sound—a far-off thundering of horses' hooves, as of a cavalcade approaching at full gallop.

"'Sdeath!" Blood muttered, and for all his reckless hardihood a look of uneasiness crossed his face. "Enough of this!" he went on roughly. "I've no more time to waste with you. Stand aside, and let me finish with Ormond yonder."

But, far from standing aside, Christopher stepped forward and menaced him with his sword.

"Back!" Blood roared at him. "D'ye want me to kill you, you young fool? . . . Very good; on your own head be it."

Once more they engaged, but this time there was a difference. Blood played with him no longer, but bent every effort toward a speedy end. Christopher never forgot the moments that followed. He looked cold death in the face; not once, but a dozen times, he escaped it by a hair's-breadth. He tried to counter the other's uncanny skill by his speed; but Blood also revealed speed—speed remorseless and terrible, that seemed ever to increase. Christopher was driven this way and that, forced to such prodigies of effort as he had never known before. Cold though the night was, the perspiration streamed from his every pore; it clotted his hair, ran down into his eyes and blinded him. His lungs failed beneath the strain; his breath came chokingly; and his heart pounded against his ribs.

Yet in the end it was not he who gave way, but

Blood. He sprang back, not for fear of what Christopher might do, but in order to listen again. He muttered an oath, and then, before Christopher could move hand or foot, had pulled out a pistol and was taking aim at Ormond's recumbent body, which lay within half a dozen yards of him. The crash of his shot and Christopher's shout of wrath rang out simultaneously.

"Murderer!" the young man cried, trying to leap at him afresh. "You damnable hound, I'll—"

Blood snatched away the linkman's torch and flung it into his face. Luckily the burning end of it missed him, but the wooden handle caught him a lusty thwack across the forehead, and drops of scalding-hot pitch were scattered down his front. By the time he had recovered from the shock, Blood was gone—vanished into the darkness from which he had come.

The next thing of which Christopher became conscious was the noise of the approaching horsemen, much louder now than when he had heard it before. It occurred to him that, unless he warned them that Ormond was lying in the middle of the road, the chances were that the duke's life—if he still had any—would be crushed out of him by their horses' hooves. There was no time to move him; the only thing to be done was to stop the horsemen. And there was none too much time for that; they were hardly more than fifty yards away. He picked up the torch and ran to meet them, brandishing it over his head and hallooing at the top of his voice.

The torch was burning low, and as a result of his vigorous treatment it straightway went out, leaving him with nothing in his hand but a piece of smoking wood. The oncoming horsemen were almost on top of him, therefore, before they realized his presence; and their leader, to avoid riding him down, had to rein in his steed so suddenly that the animal was thrown back on its haunches and its head well nigh torn asunder.

"What the devil?" Christopher heard him cry; then his voice was drowned by the shouts of his companions and the shrill screams of other horses cruelly checked in mid-career.

"Plague on you, fool!" the man bawled when the tumult had subsided. "What d'ye think you're doing —halting us on the road like this? It would have served you right if we'd ridden over you, and left you lying with a split skull. Move, man! Or by my soul—"

"Wait, Downing!" another voice interrupted sharply. "He may have news for us. Here, man, tell me this. Has a mounted party gone past—three or four men, or maybe five? Answer quickly—it is a matter of life and death."

The second voice was that of my Lord Ossory.

"There was such a party," Christopher began, "but—"

"Ah! And which way did they go?"

"They went no farther than here, not as a mounted party," Christopher said. Then he blurted out the truth. "I have indeed news for you, my Lord—bad

news. Your father is lying on the road here, not twenty yards away. That was why I stopped you, so that you might not trample him under foot."

Ossory seemed for a moment not to grasp what was told him.

"My God!" he said brokenly. "On the—on the road, you say? And we—" Then his voice trailed into silence. "Is he dead?" he asked at length.

"I don't know, my Lord. I can't tell you."

Again there was a brief silence. Then Ossory leaned forward in his saddle.

"Who are you, sir? I seem to know your voice. Is it Hallam?"

"Yes, my Lord—Hallam."

Ossory sprang down from his horse and grasped him by the arm.

"Take me to him," he said quietly.

Christopher turned and led the way without a word. There was nothing to be said. The chances were about a thousand to one, he thought, that they would find the duke dead.

As soon as he saw the still form lying on the road, Ossory ran forward and knelt beside it. He examined it for a moment, and then started up with an agonized cry.

"It is he—it is my father! And dead, I fear—dead! By Heaven, by every fiend in hell, I swear—" He checked himself with a sob. "What's the use of swearing vengeance?" he asked hopelessly. "Will it give him back his life again? It is vengeance—black, bitter

vengeance—that has destroyed him. You know who has done this, Hallam?"

"Colonel Blood," Christopher said somberly. "He was here two minutes ago."

"What! And you never told me of it?" Ossory shouted. "Here—Downing! Downing! Take every man, and get after Blood. He was here two minutes ago, and cannot be gone far. Search the streets—quick, man!"

"Which way did he go?" Downing asked.

Ossory passed on the question to Christopher.

"Ay, which way? Tell us, for the love of Heaven."

Christopher was not very sure, but as it seemed unlikely that Blood would have gone to meet his enemies, he pointed in the opposite direction. He knew that he might be sending the searchers astray, but he consoled himself with the reflection that it did not matter. They would not catch Blood, whichever way they went.

As soon as Downing and his party had disappeared, they set about undoing the duke's bonds. It was no easy task, as Christopher had already found, but presently, as they pulled and tugged at them, they heard him give a faint groan. It was a weak, piteous sound, yet it put new heart into them.

"He's alive—he's still alive!" Ossory cried. "Thank God for it! . . . I wish we had a light, though. We shall never unloose him in this fashion, and our fumbling must cause him the most dev'lish pain."

Fortunately the crowd that had been dispersed by

Blood was now beginning to reassemble, and one of the bystanders, hearing their difficulty, procured a torch. Once it became known who the victim was, indeed, there was no lack of helpers. A mattress was brought from a neighboring house, on which the duke was laid; rugs and blankets were heaped on him lest he should suffer from the cold; and there was almost a free fight for the privilege of carrying him home. A messenger having been sent in advance to order the duke's physician to be in waiting, the whole party moved off toward Clarendon House. It was almost a triumphal progress—too much so for Christopher's liking. When they reached the door he tried to withdraw; Ossory would not hear of it.

"Nay, come in, man, come in," he said. "I want to talk to you. You are the only person who saw my father a prisoner, and I want to know what happened. Tomorrow His Majesty shall be told of it. Ay, by Gad, and I hope it may open his eyes. He's always had a sneaking sympathy with this devil Blood. 'I love a bold rogue,' says he. Bold rogue—bah! Damned cut-throat, more like."

So Christopher accompanied him into the house, where he was sent into the dining room and given some refreshment. While he ate and drank, Ossory went off to confer with the doctor and see his father put to bed. For nearly an hour, Christopher saw him no more, but in the meantime the servants kept him informed of the news.

The first thing he heard was that Downing and his

search party had returned unsuccessful. They had not seen Colonel Blood, nor anyone remotely resembling him. That was to be expected, but the second item of news was not. It was the doctor's report, and it was so remarkably cheering that Christopher could hardly believe it true. His Grace had suffered no serious external injury, it seemed, nor were any of his bones broken. His chest had been grazed by a bullet, he was bruised in several places, and had a small knife wound in the back. That was all; and unless he had been injured internally by his fall from the horse, a few days' rest would put him right.

After hearing this, Christopher expected to see Ossory in a more cheerful mood, but when he returned his brow was blacker than ever.

"D'ye know who was at the bottom of this?" he burst out. "I don't mean Blood: he was but the agent—the tool. There was another behind him—a greater devil than he is, I vow!"

"Who, my Lord?"

"Buckingham! His Grace of Buckingham! It was he who set Blood on. I wondered how it was all so marvelously well arranged. It wasn't Blood only; the hand of Buckingham was there, too."

Christopher stared, as well he might.

"His Grace of Buckingham plotting with Colonel Blood? I—it sounds impossible, my Lord. Are you sure of it?"

"Sure of it?" Ossory said. "We have Blood's own word. He told my father so when they were taking

him out of the carriage—told him it in so many words—taunted him with it! And what do you think they'd planned to do with him? You'll hardly believe me. Hang him on Tyburn Gallows, like a common felon! I can't bear to think of it." He covered his face with his hands. "And how narrow was his escape—my God, how narrow!"

Presently he looked up again.

"Tell me what happened," he said, "all that you saw."

As modestly as possible, Christopher told his story.

"I did very little, you see," he said in conclusion. "His Grace had thrown himself off the horse before I came. I didn't even know who he was until Blood spoke his name. I only saw a man who seemed sore beset, and—"

"You saved his life a dozen times over," Ossory interrupted warmly. "They mightn't have got him on the horse again, but they'd certainly have pistoled him. Indeed, they tried to, and you held them off. You held off Blood, himself. And you saved him again from us, when we came galloping down the road like a pack of fools." He sprang forward impulsively, and put an arm round Christopher's shoulders. "You saved my father's life, Hallam, and by so doing rendered me a service that I can never repay."

"Nay, you overrate what I did," Christopher said. "It was the merest chance that I was there at all."

"The merest chance? Ay, the whole thing was a chance—a living marvel. God in His mercy cannot

have meant my father to be killed; that's all. What else can one think? How did he escape all the bullets? There must have been nearly a dozen fired at him—one of them by Blood himself. And give the devil his due: he can handle his weapons, can Master Blood. There are few who can match him. It's different with Buckingham; he, at heart, is an arrant coward. I'd call him out, but he wouldn't fight me. I know he wouldn't; I've tried him before, on another matter. But I'll have justice on him, never fear. Blood may escape me, but he shall not. Tomorrow morning I am going to the king, and he shall be told the truth."

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## T W E L V E

### *His Grace of Buckingham*

CHRISTOPHER remained at Clarendon House all night, and in the morning, to his no small alarm, he was taken off by Ossory to Whitehall.

"Tush, man!" his lordship said. "What's there to be scared of? Naturally His Majesty will want to see you. You've only to tell him what happened, the same as you told it to me."

"But my clothes," Christopher protested. "Look at them! Let me go to my lodging first, and—"

"I'll lend you some of mine. We are about of a size. I'll have half a dozen suits laid out, and you can take your choice."

And so, dressed in borrowed plumes, Christopher rode to the palace in the Duke of Ormond's carriage, and descended from it in the courtyard with an obsequious footman to hold open the door for him. There, for a space, his glory ceased; for while Ossory went off to seek an audience with the king he was put into the inevitable anteroom.

He was fairly familiar with such places by this time, but he had never seen one where so much giggling and whispering went on. Nobody addressed a word to him, but everyone looked at him as though

he were some rare wild beast. Half the people present, he was positive, knew that the clothes he was wearing were Ossory's, and those who did not were being informed of it by the others. Hence the general mirth.

At length, when he had endured it for about an hour, an individual in uniform came in—an usher, Christopher took him to be.

"Mr. Christopher Hallam!" this person called.

"At your service," Christopher said, rising.

"His Majesty commands your immediate presence, sir."

And forthwith all whispering and giggling ceased. There was nothing but staring as Christopher followed the man out of the room.

He was taken along various corridors and passages, and finally brought to a halt outside a closed door. This his guide opened, and motioned him to enter. Like a man in a dream, Christopher did so.

"Mr. Christopher Hallam," he heard the usher announce, and then the door closed behind his back. He was in the presence of the king.

His Majesty was sitting in a carved oak chair beside a table. On his lap lay a little long-eared dog, which he caressed continually with uneasy movements of his hand. Opposite him was Ossory, standing alone; and there were also in the room the king's brother—the terrible Papist Duke of York who was heir to the throne—and Sir Thomas Clifford, the Treasurer.

For a while no one noticed Christopher, and he stood silent, waiting. He had seen the king from afar

before, but never at close quarters. For the first time he was able to gaze upon that strange, strong, harsh face, with its gypsy-dark complexion, furrowed cheeks, queerly slanting eyebrows, and piercing black eyes. Not a handsome man, he decided; not even, in the accepted sense of the word, an Englishman; but a man who looked every inch a king.

Presently the object of his regard raised his eyes and, seeing him anxiously waiting, smiled. There was never a less formal monarch than Charles the Second, and it was always his way to be affable with those of lower degree. He had a singularly charming smile, too, that lit up his saturnine face like a ray of sunlight.

"Ah, Mr. Hallam," said he. "You have a story to tell—or so my Lord Ossory would have us believe."

Christopher bowed low. "You mean concerning the attack on his Grace of Ormond, Sire?"

The king nodded.

"Wait a moment," the Duke of York interrupted, as Christopher was about to begin. "Who is this young man?"

"He is in the service of my father, your Highness," Ossory explained. "I can vouch for him as a gentleman of the most loyal sentiments."

"H'm," the duke murmured. "We have need of such, God knows. I don't seem to know his face. Is he—er—have we—" And he looked doubtfully across at Sir Thomas Clifford.

"No, James, he isn't of your religion," the king

said impatiently. "But never mind that now: leave his conversion till later. We want to hear what he has to say. Come, Hallam, your story. And you, my Lord—" this was to Ossory—"have the goodness not to interrupt."

He himself interrupted several times ere the story was told, however. When Christopher described his meeting with Colonel Blood, he listened in open-mouthed amazement.

"You actually saw him, and crossed swords with him—this monster of a colonel?" he said. "Then I congratulate you, man. There are not many who have done it and lived to tell the tale. What kind of a man is he?"

"A big man, Sire—of about Your Majesty's own height, but wider in the shoulders. A dark-faced fellow, with—"

"Dark-faced, eh?" the king laughed. "To be sure, he would be! What villain is not? We poor black-visaged rogues have a sad reputation. If ever they want a villain at the playhouse, they rub his face with walnut juice, clap a black wig on him, and there he is. Oh, and so our good colonel looks the part, does he? And how did he make shift with his weapons?"

"Better than they do at the playhouse, Sire. I thought he'd kill me every moment."

"But he didn't," Charles said, "which was very thoughtful of him—or we should never have heard your story. Continue it, man, we're all agog."

"That is all, Sire. I have no more to tell you."

The king nodded, and was silent for a while.

"Listen, then," he said at last. "My Lord Ossory has some idea that his Grace of Buckingham was privy to this crime. Do you know anything of that?"

"Nothing, Sire—except what his lordship told me."

"Your Majesty, I said that Mr. Hallam knew nothing of it," Ossory put in.

"You did, my Lord," the king agreed. "But there's no harm in my asking him, surely? The point is this: your accusation against Buckingham rests entirely on one man's word."

"My father's word!" Ossory said hotly.

"Nay, pardon me—the word of Colonel Blood. He told your father that Buckingham had set him on. Is that not so?"

Ossory made a gesture of impatience.

"But it is plain that he spoke the truth. How else could he have known that my father would be on the road last night?"

"How else?" the king said. "You are talking foolishly, my Lord. How else? Why, in a thousand ways. Anyone might have betrayed it."

"But why should he say such a thing if it were not true?" Ossory persisted. "Why lie to a man whom he thought as good as dead? There's neither sense nor reason in it, Sire."

The king reflected for a moment.

"It was a dev'lish plot, at all events," he said, "whether Buckingham had a hand in it or not. You

know, Ossory," he went on with some feeling, "there is no man on earth for whom I have more respect than your father. Most certainly this rogue Blood shall be apprehended, if there lives the man who can do it. I'll have every hole and corner of the city combed for him. I'll offer a reward—notices shall be posted—"

Ossory shook his head bitterly.

"A reward has been offered before, Sire. Five hundred guineas, and the notices were posted at every street corner. But he was never taken. Your Majesty—" he sank onto his knees—"my father has always been your faithful servant. For his sake, I pray you, indulge me in this. Let his Grace of Buckingham be brought in here now, and made to answer this charge in your presence."

"But what would be the good?" the king asked fretfully. "Even if he did it, he won't be fool enough to say so."

"Nevertheless, I pray Your Majesty to have him in," Ossory begged.

"Ay, have him in," the Duke of York said. "It will scare him, anyway—make him amend his ways."

The king still hesitated. Presently he glanced at the clock.

"Eleven," he muttered. "He should be outside now, waiting for me.... Oh, very well."

He rang a hand bell that stood on the table, and immediately an usher appeared—the same who had escorted Christopher in.

"Ask his Grace of Buckingham to come to me here," Charles ordered.

The usher bowed and withdrew, to reappear a minute or two later with Buckingham in attendance. On seeing Ossory in the room, the duke halted for a moment on the threshold, and Christopher could have sworn that his face blanched. But it was only for a moment; then he stepped gracefully forward, ignoring all save the king.

"Your Majesty wishes to see me?" he said.

"Not I, but my Lord Ossory. He has a—er—but he'd better tell you himself."

"Last night, my Lord Duke," Ossory began, "my father's carriage was stopped in St. James' Street. He was taken out of it, bound and gagged, and mounted on a horse with the intention of hanging him on Tyburn Gallows."

Buckingham was all polite concern.

"Hanging him on Tyburn Gallows? Gad save us, sir! You amaze me. Whoever heard of such a thing? I trust his Grace is none the worse for it."

"He is not much the worse," Ossory replied grimly. "Not so much as one might expect."

"Ah!" Buckingham appeared greatly relieved. "My congratulations to him, sir, and respectful condolences. It was some Toby-man, I presume."

"It was Colonel Blood."

"What? That fellow again!" the duke cried. "On my soul, this passes all bearing. It's high time he was scotched." He turned toward the king. "Give me

leave, Sire, and I'll have every den in Alsatia searched for him."

"They've been searched before," Charles said drily.

"But not by his Grace of Buckingham," Ossory put in. "*He* could find him, I'll warrant."

Buckingham's eyebrows went up.

"Er—your pardon, my Lord. *I* could find him? Why me in particular? You were a trifle emphatic, I thought."

"I was!" Ossory replied fiercely. "And for this reason, my Lord Duke. When the villain Blood seized upon my father last night he said that you were his backer—that it was at your instance the deed was done."

For a moment Buckingham did not reply. What his feelings were none could tell. He must have been expecting some such blow, for he did not lose command of himself. His face expressed nothing but indignant surprise.

"So?" he said at last. "I begin to understand. This is why I am entertained to an account of your good father's woes. It is intended to fasten the crime onto *me*. I see. Your Majesty—" he bowed very low to the king—"I beg that you will take my sword. It has never been drawn but in your service, and I will surrender it to none but you. I am to be committed to the Tower, I take it, on the word of Colonel Blood. Very good; now, as ever, I am Your Majesty's humble servant."

"Have done, man—to the devil with your play-

acting!" the king said irritably. "I only sent for you so that you might hear what the fellow had said."

"What my Lord Ossory says he said," Buckingham corrected.

"How? Do you dare to insinuate that I am lying?" Ossory demanded angrily.

"My Lord, I insinuate nothing. If anybody insinuates, it is surely yourself. You do more—you bring a serious charge against me. I merely ask that you will prove it."

It was manifestly impossible to do so, and the young man ground his teeth in baffled rage.

"Do you deny the charge, then?" he asked.

"Deny it?" Buckingham said. "My faith, no! I scorn it. I have long known of your father's hostility to me, my Lord, but I hardly thought he would sink to this." He laughed. "It is strange that in so marvelous an adventure, his Grace should have suffered so little harm," he went on. "How do you account for it, my Lord? It makes me wonder if Colonel Blood was ever there at all. Are you sure it was he—quite sure? Or did someone else—some lackey, perhaps—put on a pair of false whiskers and whisper my name in your father's ear?"

"'Sdeath!" Ossory shouted. "This is too much. You infernal hound—" he caught the duke by the shoulder and swung him round—"listen to this, for it's the last word you'll ever have of me. If my father comes to a bad end, by sword or by pistol, I shan't be at a loss to know the author of it. I shall regard *you* as

the assassin, not your hireling Blood or whoever it may be. And the next time I meet you I shall shoot you down like the dog you are. I'll do it even though you hide behind His Majesty's chair—d'ye hear me? And I tell you it now, in his presence, so that you may be sure that I shall keep my word."

The king sprang to his feet, throwing the dog off his lap so suddenly that it ran away yelping into a corner. He was easygoing up to a point, but none could be more dignified than he when there was need of dignity.

"My Lord—my Lord!" he cried. "You are forgetting yourself. Unhand his Grace, sir, and leave our presence at once."

"I ask Your Majesty's pardon," Ossory said humbly. "But if my conduct was at fault, I protest that my sentiments were not. A man has the right to protect his father's life, Sir . . . And protect him I will," he added with a glance at Buckingham as he left the room.

After his departure there was a silence, broken at last by Buckingham.

"Have I also Your Majesty's leave to go?" he asked.

The king looked at him uneasily.

"Lud, what a pother!" he said. "What d'ye make of it, James?"

The Duke of York sneered. There was no love lost between him and Buckingham, and nature had made him a good sneerer, if it had given him the power to do little else well.

"I think his Grace would be well advised to keep Ossory's warning in mind," he said.

"And I too," the king nodded. "Yes, you may go, my Lord Duke." He looked round the room, and his eye fell on Christopher. "And you also, Mr. Hallam," he added, in this case tempering the curtness of the dismissal with a smile.

Buckingham went out of the presence chamber sorrowful and downcast, with the air of a much injured man. But that was on the surface only; inwardly he was in a state of raging fury. Passing through the palace without a word to anyone, he went into the courtyard and ordered his carriage. When it arrived he drove straight home, there to think matters over and work off some of his spleen on his servants.

So Ossory would pistol him, would he? Shoot him like a dog, eh? . . . The trouble was that he feared the young Irishman might. He was not one to make threats which he failed to perform. The last time they had quarreled, his Grace had only escaped a duel by appealing to the king, and he was not likely to get much support in that quarter now.

The chief object of his wrath was not Ossory, however, but Colonel Blood. If ever a man had proved a broken reed on which to lean, it was he. Not only had he failed to kill Ormond, but he had blurted out the whole story of the plot. It could be denied, of course; it would *have* to be denied. But his Grace had denied so many things in his time, and there was a limit to people's credulity.

He writhed in his chair, snarling like an angry cat. It was idle to sit and repine, however; he must act. And the first thing to be done, he decided, was to see Blood and have a reckoning with him. What form the reckoning would take he did not yet know, but he intended it to be a grim one. His chief fear, though he would have died rather than confess it, was lest Blood should make a fresh attack on Ormond, and so bring him into collision with the firebrand Ossory again.

Finally he rose and summoned a lackey.

"I want the man Gaunt," he said. "If he's in the house, send him to me at once. If not, find him."

Some time later Uriah appeared. Since his shop by the river had become too hot to hold him, he had taken service with Buckingham, mainly to act as a spy on behalf of Blood. The duke, for his part, fondly imagined him to be *his* spy upon Blood—a state of affairs which suited Ury admirably.

"Stand back!" Buckingham ordered, eyeing his twitching face askance. "Not too close to me, damn you. I don't like the smell of you. Well, have you kept watch on the colonel?"

"As you commanded, my Lord."

"And you've found out where he lives—his house?"

"To be sure. It's in Whitefriars—Alsatia—fronting on the river."

"The river? You could take me there by boat?"

"This moment, if your Grace pleases," Ury replied.

"Fool! Am I likely to go there in broad daylight?" the duke snapped. "Tonight, maybe—" and he reflected for a while. "Have a boat in waiting for me at Westminster Stairs at eleven o'clock tonight. Do you know a boatman who is to be trusted?"

"I can find such a one, my Lord."

"Then see that he is there. I look to you to arrange it; if there's any miscarriage I'll have the skin off your back. At eleven o'clock tonight, mind. Now go—get out!"

Uriah went, and thereafter the duke sat and waited for the approach of night with such patience as he could command. At about half-past ten he set out alone, wrapped in a long cloak and wearing a dark slouch hat, and promptly at eleven presented himself at Westminster Stairs. The river was shrouded in darkness, but he made out the shape of a boat at the foot of the steps. Uriah had not failed him. After a brief conversation conducted in whispers, he got on board, and they glided off downstream. Not another word was spoken until they were opposite Whitefriars.

"Yonder's the house, my Lord," Gaunt said at length.

"S-sh! Less of your 'my Lord,'" the duke hissed, indicating the boatman. "Which house? The big one?"

All that he could see of it was a black hulk of a

building standing on the river's brink. Part of it, in point of fact, actually overhung the water, and was supported on huge oaken beams set upright in the mud. Taking out a lantern which he had hitherto kept hidden under his cloak, Gaunt steered the boat into the dark archway beneath the house. It was a foul, nauseating place; the tide was on the ebb, and all around was soft, evil-smelling mud, littered with every kind of refuse and alive with rats. The boat went on, and still on, until it seemed to his Grace that he was being taken into the nethermost depths of hell. They stopped at last at the foot of a slimy stone staircase, above which he saw a stout door, barred and crisscrossed with iron.

"H'm," said he. "The colonel's bolt hole when he's attacked on the landward side, eh? But how if he were attacked on both sides? That might be arranged."

Uriah, it is to be suspected, grinned to himself in the darkness, but he said never a word.

"Wait for me here," the duke went on. "I shall be an hour, maybe—hardly more."

Climbing out of the boat, he walked gingerly up the steps and hammered on the door. There was someone in the house, for he could hear a noise of shouting and singing, but several minutes passed before his knock was answered. Even then the door was not opened; a strong light shone suddenly down through a hole in the boards above his head.

"Who're you?" a voice inquired.

"I am come to see Colonel Blood," Buckingham said. "Is he at home?"

"The colonel, is it? How many are ye?" The light flashed hither and thither. "Three—only three? Well, ye'll do no harm to him wi' that few."

"I don't want to do him any harm, man. I want to speak to him, that's all."

"Ay, but who are ye? Let's hear your name, master."

"Oh, tell him Villiers—Mr. Villiers—and he'll understand."

The light vanished and there was the sound of a trap door being shut; then ensued another long pause. At length, with much creaking of bolts and groaning of locks, the door at the top of the steps was opened, and the duke invited within. He found himself in a narrow passage, from which, after the door had been closed and locked again, he was taken into the room where the shouting and singing was going on.

This was a large apartment and, from its absence of windows, appeared to be a cellar. At one end a coal fire was burning; on it an enormous stewing pot was set. A hideous old woman, very hooked of nose and prominent of chin, was bending over the pot like a witch over a cauldron. There were some fifteen or twenty other people in the room—the lowest denizens of Alsatia, men and women together—taking their ease on chairs and benches, some of them even sprawled on the floor. The duke could not see an honest face anywhere, or, what mattered more to him,

a clean one. The smell of stew, of smoke, and of unwashed humanity smote him like a blow; at any other time he would have turned and run from it.

Now, however, he followed his guide impassively, brushing past half-drunken men and stepping over half-naked women until he reached a door on the farther side. Beyond was a crazy wooden staircase, and at the top of that a sort of hall. Here the man threw open another door and signaled to him to enter.

"In there," he said gruffly. "The colonel's awaitin' ye."

In contrast to the rest of the house, the room within was furnished with some approach to comfort. There was a carpet on the floor, and in front of the fire were two or three armchairs. The window was closely shuttered, and the room was lighted by candles set in silver sconces. A smell of good liquor pervaded the air, and on the table stood a half-empty bowl of punch, with bottles and glasses beside it.

In one of the chairs Blood was sitting, but as the duke entered he rose and came to meet him. This was the moment that Buckingham had been anticipating all day, waiting for, like a hound in leash; but now that he actually saw the man his heart unaccountably failed him and his resolution ebbed away. The colonel, in fact, was the first to speak.

"Good evening, my Lord," said he. "So you've discovered my humble abode. And you're right welcome; I'm glad to see you here. Sit down. Or," he added sarcastically, "perhaps your Grace would pre-

fer to remain standing, as the last time we met."

"So you failed last night," the duke said bitterly.

Blood nodded. "Ay, I failed. Ormond still lives, I hear. How is he today, my Lord?"

"He is very well, I believe. My God! I wonder you dare ask me such a question."

"You wonder I dare? Why, my Lord? Do you think that I'm afraid of you?"

"I'll soon give you cause to be, if you're not! I put the man into your hands—helpless, at your mercy—and then you go and bungle it!"

"No." Blood shook his head. "I didn't bungle it. Fate was against me, that's all."

"Ay, it would be," the duke snarled. "I never knew a failure yet but what the blame was Fate's."

"In this case Fate took the form of a young man, my Lord—a country boy."

"What boy?"

"A young man from the north, whom the devil prompted to interfere at the critical moment. Something of a swordsman, he was—or I should have shot him. But I couldn't shoot down a swordsman, so Ormond had to escape. A pity, my Lord; but don't take it so much to heart. His Grace is not immortal. I missed him this time, but I shall get him the next."

"Next time?" Buckingham raged. "There'll be no next time! Henceforth you'll leave Ormond alone—do you hear?"

"Leave him alone? Why that?"

"You'll leave him alone," the duke repeated.

"You've had your chance, my man, and failed. Why the devil didn't you cut his throat when you had him there? Why must you plot and replot—mount him on a horse and do this and that? Couldn't you have killed him first and hanged him afterwards? And then, to crown all, you mentioned my name to him. By this time it will be all over the town that I'm in league with you."

"Will it so?" Blood said. "And what of that?"

"You passed me your word that you'd take it all onto yourself, and that my part in it should never be known."

"Did I?" Blood pretended to think. "Ay, maybe I did. I've passed my word to so many things in my time that it's hard to remember them all. Your Grace must pardon me."

For the first time, perhaps, the duke realized the full extent of his folly in allying himself with such a man. The colonel's word was no more to be relied on than a puff of wind. That the same thing might equally well be said of himself he did not at first see, but Blood lost no time in pointing it out to him.

"See here, my Lord," said he, "we are both of us rogues, so why blink the matter? It's just a question of which of us is the greater. You went to the Black-jack that night thinking to make use of me, and I went there thinking to make use of you. We were each prepared to see the other hanged, if need be. And now—what? You've turned scared—chicken-hearted, eh—and want to get rid of me. Is that it?"

That was "it" precisely, but something in the way the question was asked suggested that Blood did not intend to have their alliance dissolved. And short of killing him, his Grace did not see how it was to be dissolved against his will. He hesitated a moment, considering the manner of his reply—whether to give the soft answer that turneth away wrath, or to stand on his dignity. In the end he strove to achieve a compromise between the two.

"Chicken-hearted?" he said. "I don't much like your choice of words, my man. If Ormond is attacked again, suspicion will fall on me—can't you see? And so I ask you to leave him in peace. What's chicken-hearted about that? It's the merest common sense."

"It may be," Blood agreed. "But I'm not going to leave Ormond in peace, my Lord, and that's flat."

"Then, by the living God!" Buckingham shouted, "you shall hang. I'll bring you to the gallows."

The colonel made a gesture of contempt.

"Hang?" said he. "Nay, I don't think so." Then he chuckled. "You're but a poor fool after all, my Lord. Think now: if I were afraid of your hanging me, would I let you go out of this house alive?"

The duke glared at him, his florid face turning slowly pale.

"You daren't do otherwise," he said.

"I dared to lay hands on Ormond, didn't I? What's one dead duke more than another? But have no fear; your life is safe. You are more use to me alive."

"But—but what—"

"Listen, my Lord, and I'll explain. In your care that nobody should know of your dealings with me, you always wrote to me yourself—in your own hand. Do you remember? It was very thoughtful of you, for it gave us your handwriting to copy. And now we have letters from you—in that same handwriting, and bearing your ducal seal—oh! of the most damnable quality. Plots against the throne; plots to restore the Commonwealth with yourself in the shoes of Old Noll. It's not impossible, you see. You are the son-in-law of Fairfax, and are known to have been mixed up with Fifth Monarchy men and such scum."

"What?" Buckingham gasped. "You—you mean forgeries? But they'd be known for such."

"Would they?" Blood smiled. "I shouldn't set too much store by that. I'm old in the ways of conspirators, mind; I know the kind of letters they write. Most men would say too much, and strain credulity beyond belief. But not me, my Lord, not Colonel Blood. It's a little does it—a word here and there."

Buckingham stood silent, appalled. The danger was real enough, as he very well knew. If written evidence such as the colonel described were produced against him there would be an inquiry—that at the least. And he could not face such an inquiry. His way of life had been dishonest for years, and something to his discredit was bound to be discovered.

"And you'll mark this," Blood went on. "I can have those letters brought to light any time."

The duke's wits worked desperately, but he could

see no way of escape. Given time, he might achieve something; but for the moment the man had him in a cleft stick.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked.

"A very little, my Lord. Merely to be my friend at Court. When I fall—for I shall, maybe, some day or other—you will go down with me; be sure of that. So if ever you hear of me being taken, set to work to have me freed. You can prepare the ground beforehand. Tell the fine gentlemen at Court that I know everything, and have marvelous disclosures to make. There's not one of them but has some guilty secret to hide, and every man will think you mean his own. Scare them, my Lord—put fear into their black souls—and so shall we go on our way rejoicing."

So that was it, Buckingham thought. He was to act as Blood's proxy at Court, a mouthpiece to spread the terror of his name there.

"Curse you!" he said with concentrated fury. "You are a devil out of hell, I vow! No mortal man ever begot you; no woman—"

"Have done!" Blood interrupted contemptuously. "If you want to rave, go and do it at home. Get out, before I let the boys below loose on you! Ury Gaunt and the boatman will take you back to Westminster Stairs. They're both men of mine, so you'd better be civil to them. Ah, that surprises you! You thought Ury was *your* man, did you? You honestly believed that you could get a man to spy on me for a few shillings a week? . . . You poor fool—get out!"

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## THIRTEEN

### *An Amorous Plot*

IN the garden of my Lady Robinson, the wife of the Lieutenant of the Tower, Mistress Nancy Edwards, bent double over a flower bed, was engaged in arranging small stones in the form of a circle. There was no earthly reason, be it said, why the stones should be so arranged. She was doing it merely to give herself the appearance of being busy—of having her attention occupied. Behind her there was a sound of advancing footsteps, and she knew very well whose footsteps they were.

It was not the first time that she had met Christopher there, nor yet the second. And each time he had become increasingly sure of himself. He had been very slow to kiss her; she had almost had to ask him for it. But once the ice was broken, he had turned most amazingly masterful. Not in an unpleasant way, to be sure; he was a nice boy, a *very* nice boy. And he was also, it seemed, the heir to an estate; she did not overlook that. But something must be done to put him in his place, or his lordliness of manner would become insufferable.

The footsteps behind her drew nearer—nearer—and finally came to a halt. Her industry and absorp-

tion appeared to increase; the arranging of small stones in circles might have been the only thing in the world for her. Indeed, she overacted her part; and presently Christopher realized it.

"Don't pretend, my sweet. You know that I am here," he said.

"Yes, Captain Beckman; I heard your footsteps."

"Captain Beckman! . . . What do you mean by that?"

"Oh!" She wheeled round, her face a pretty mask of surprise. "So it is not Captain Beckman. Only you, Christopher."

"Only me. What made you think otherwise?"

She affected to be confused.

"I—oh, I thought I knew Captain Beckman's tread," she said.

"Then do you meet him so often that you know the sound of his feet?"

"They are such big feet—not to be forgotten when once you have heard them," she said lightly.

"You can't pass it off like that," Christopher said, angry now and very much in earnest. "Were you expecting him here this afternoon? Is that what you mean?"

"Expecting him here? How could I be?"

"Who is this Captain Beckman?" Christopher demanded.

"A soldier—one of the officers of the Tower guard."

"I see. And you amuse yourself with him here in my absence?"

"Really, sir—" she lifted her chin—"you are insulting. Have I given you the right to question me like this?"

"Will you answer me?" Christopher sprang forward and seized her by the wrist. Then, repenting of his violence, he bent and kissed her fingers. "Tell me," he pleaded. "You—you don't like—"

His tone was as humble as she could have wished, but the joy of teasing him had got hold of her now, and she only tossed her head.

"I don't like having my wrist bruised by your great hand," she said. "Captain Beckman would never do a thing—"

"To the devil with your Captain Beckman!" He flung her hand from him and turned to walk away. He went no farther than the end of the path; then, looking back, he saw her nursing her wrist as if in pain. "Forgive me!" he cried remorsefully, hastening back to her. "I am a brute, but—oh, why won't you tell me? If you like this Beckman fellow better than me, say so and let me go. But don't torture me."

"Torture you?" She held up her wrist in reproach.

"You have only to say the word, and I'll never trouble you again. But you can't have both of us—Beckman and me. Choose!"

"Choose?" She forgot about her wrist, and laughed at him. "I am to choose between hot-headed Christopher and heavy-footed Beckman. Are there no other men in the world?"

"In Heaven's name, can't you be serious?"

"If I were, I'd choose neither of you. Oh, are you going again, sir?"

"I am, madam. And this time I shall not return. Never! Do you think you can play with me as you like?"

She looked at him for a moment, and gradually her expression changed. He had done very little to deserve all this, and she knew it. She began to feel mildly ashamed of herself. It was cruel of her to torment him so, cruel and heartless.

"Christopher!" she said impulsively—and stopped.

"I believe you like this quarreling and bickering. Do you, Nancy?"

His tone was mournful in the extreme, but the words gave her the cue she needed.

"There is always the making up again," she said softly.

He sprang towards her, eyes alight, and with a little shriek she turned and fled. Down the path she ran, her skirt spreading out behind her like a fan, and Christopher following at her heels like a merciless pursuer. And then, at the corner of the wall beyond, she stopped suddenly—so that he cannoned into her from behind, and had to clasp her in his arms to keep her from falling.

"A-ha!" he cried exultantly. "Now, my lady, I'll—"

His voice died away. Not five paces distant two men were standing. One was elderly, thin and worn, and of a somewhat shrewish cast of countenance; the other was tall and broad-shouldered, with a pointed

gray beard and the black clothes of a parson.

For a while no one spoke. Christopher slowly unclasped his arms from round the lady's waist, and then stepped forward in front of her as though to shield her from view. Finally the parson broke into a chuckle.

"Preserve us!" he said. "What's this? A game of nymph and satyr? Here in the Tower! Why Mistress Nancy—" he removed his hat and bowed—"I congratulate you. Until this moment I had thought the Tower a place of gloom and sadness, but you turn it into an Arcadian grove."

He would probably have gone on longer, but at this point his elderly companion intervened.

"Who the devil are you, sir?" he demanded in a voice very different from the parson's unctuous tones. "And what are you doing with my daughter?"

Lord, thought Christopher, her father! The terrible being who shut her up in her bedroom whenever he had occasion to leave her! The fat was properly in the fire now.

"Name of Hallam, sir," he found himself saying. "Christopher Hallam."

"What? Hallam!" the old man shouted. "I've never heard of you! . . . Wait, though." He turned to the parson. "Wasn't that the name of the man you saw that night? The night she was taken off, I mean."

The parson frowned and wrinkled his forehead in the effort of remembering.

"Ay, that was his name, I truly believe," he said.

"But don't be too hasty, my friend, I beg of you. This may not be the same man."

Mr. Edwards paid no heed to his warning, but advanced upon Christopher and stood glaring into his face.

"So it is you we have to thank for that—*you!*" he cried. "And you dare to come here—to pursue her again? My God!" Then his wrath descended upon his daughter. "You shameless wench! And you stand behind him there laughing at me. Oh, what have I done that I should be saddled with such a creature?"

"No, I'm not laughing," Nancy said tremulously. "I—I wouldn't have had this happen for the world."

"You wouldn't have had me find out for the world," her father retorted. "Ay, I can well believe it. Come here, you—"

He tried to force his way towards her, but Christopher, thinking he meant to strike her, moved before him and kept him back.

"Say what you have to say to me, sir," he urged. "Your daughter is not at fault. I am to blame for all that has happened."

"What I have to say!" Mr. Edwards raged. "If I were a few years younger, my man, one of us would not leave this place alive. Would to God my son were here; he would soon make an end of you. But you knew he was not, eh? You knew I was alone—an old man—"

The parson laid a hand on his arm.

"Your daughter is nearly in tears," he said. "In

common charity, allow her to go. I urge you, my friend."

"Ay, go—go!" Mr. Edwards cried. "Go to your room, you jade, and stop there! I'll deal with you later, when I've finished with your gay seducer here."

Nancy moved forward to obey. For a moment she hesitated, looking up into Christopher's face.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Christopher, I—"

"Don't speak to him!" her father shouted. "Don't you dare, miss! Away to your room, before I lay a stick about you."

"Captain Beckman," she said with seeming irrelevance, "is a man nearly as old as my father, and something like him."

Her irate parent stared.

"Captain Beckman?" he said. "What the devil has he to do with it?" Then he turned to Christopher again. "Now, sir—now! Let's hear what you've to say. Do you admit that it was you that night—you whom Doctor Andrews here found mishandling her?"

"I—yes, sir, it was I who was with her. But I was deceived. I—"

"Thunder of God! He admits it." The old man waved his arms wildly. "And here he is again, still pursuing her—and above all, the wench permitting him. Lord help us, is it a harlot that I've begotten?"

His face worked pitifully, and Christopher realized that in his way—a peculiar way, perhaps—he was fond of his daughter.

"On my honor, sir, I mean her no harm," he said. "And I had nothing to do with her abduction—I swear that I had not! I was as much deceived as you were."

"Bah! You liar—you dirty hound! She was decoyed from the Tower by a forged letter, and you know it. But what do you want with her now? You won't get her out a second time. With the best will in the world she couldn't go. I've given orders that except when I am with her she is not to pass the gates, and the warders will see to it. So what do you want? You can't hope to ravish her here in the Tower."

"I love her," Christopher said simply. It was a singularly unpropitious moment for such an avowal; but what else was there to say? It was the truth, and the old man might as well know it now as later.

"Eh? You what? You *love* her? Well, may the devil fly away with my soul. You love her, do you? You trick her with a forged letter, compromise her in every way your damnable ingenuity can suggest, and now tell me you love her. Then you've an uncommon queer way of loving—that's all I've to say."

"Nevertheless, I love her," Christopher repeated stubbornly.

"Confound your insolence!" Mr. Edwards shouted. "You forger! You'll be asking me for her hand in marriage next."

"I do ask for it," Christopher said. "With all the possible humility in the world, sir, I ask your permission to make my addresses to her."

The other did not shout this time, but simply stared at him. It may be that his astonishment was too great for words, or perhaps it was something in the young man's face that made him pause. At any rate, pause he did, and seemed for a while to deliberate on the manner of his reply.

"And I decline to grant my permission, sir, positively and entirely," he said at last.

"I expected nothing else," Christopher murmured.

It seemed that he had said the wrong thing, for Mr. Edwards' wrath broke out afresh.

"Oh, you did, did you? You only asked it as a matter of form—a sop to the parent of the girl you've wronged, eh?" He peered at Christopher's face again. "Ay, you'll be a great hero with the women," he sneered. "You're the sort that is. You've an honest, forthright look about you that would make a woman believe in you in spite of herself. I can't blame that poor, silly lass of mine. But you won't get her, not if you try for a thousand years. . . . Is that all, then? Or have you anything more to say?"

Christopher shook his head. It was useless to try to reason with the man while he was in this mood; better keep silent, he thought. And before Mr. Edwards could begin again the parson intervened.

"Enough!" he said. "You have issued your fiat; let it rest at that. Come away, my friend."

"Ay, I'm coming. But first I want him to understand this. Listen, you! If I catch you inside the Tower again, I'll have the warders throw you into the

river. You think me powerless, do you—a silly old man? We'll see."

For the next three or four days Christopher's state of mind was like that of the tragic hero of a melodrama. He discovered within himself stores of self-pity hitherto undreamed of. The world was an evil place, he thought, and it had treated him evilly. First it had robbed him of his home, and now it had robbed him of his love. He had done nothing to deserve either calamity, and could have done nothing to prevent either. It was Fate—simply the inscrutable working of Fate. Alas and alack!

Had he only realized it, compared with that of Nancy, his lot was almost a pleasant one. He was able to indulge his sorrow, at any rate—to sigh his loudest and look his most miserable with none to say him nay. Indeed, for the time being he had very little else to do. He no longer worked at Peter Mason's fencing school all day. Since Blood had recognized him when they fought on the road, it was obvious that he knew all about him; so that to continue his spying at the fencing school would be a waste of time. In the evenings he usually prowled the streets with Downing, but the rest of the day was his own.

It was otherwise with Nancy. Her father saw to it that she was not alone for a moment. And he adopted an attitude towards her that she found most exasperating. He chose to assume that she was a poor, innocent fool who had fallen a victim to the wiles of an

attractive scoundrel. She would rather, far rather, that he had called her a wanton and a harlot. For she would have known that she was not that; whereas when he called her a fool there was always a faint possibility that he might be right.

To be sure, she furiously denied that possibility, even going to the length of telling her father that *he* was the fool, if anybody was. The result was that day followed day in argument and recrimination. Finally, Nancy found out that Christopher had offered to marry her, and straightway demanded that he be allowed to renew the offer to herself. Her father, poor man, almost foamed at the mouth.

"I'd sooner see you dead, you silly wench!" he shouted. "You'll marry whom I choose, by God, or not at all!"

"I'd sooner *be* dead than marry a man chosen by you! I know what your idea of married life is—I've seen it here at home."

"Nancy, my dear—my dear—" Her mother's voice rose in pained reproach.

"Oh, let me alone, Mother! It's true enough. Do you suppose I want to be treated all my life as you are?"

Whether or not Christopher was a scoundrel, Mr. Edwards was certainly right in saying that she had fallen a victim to his wiles. That was plain to all concerned—and more especially to herself. Now that she had lost him, she knew that she wanted him most desperately. She never ceased reproaching her-

self for her treatment of him on that last day. She thought he understood that she had only been teasing him, but she could not be sure of it. He might now regard her as a heartless coquette, and be thinking himself well rid of her.

It was the existence of these damning possibilities, the fact of not knowing anything for certain, that worried her more than all else. If she could have been sure of Christopher, sure that he still wanted her, she could have put up with her father's ill-temper. She was used to it, in any case; if he were not nagging about one thing, he would be about another.

The only other man of whom she saw much in those days was Doctor Andrews, the parson. He was a constant visitor; indeed, he came so often and stayed so long that she could not help wondering at it. Had he been an unmarried man she would have feared that she was herself the attraction; but since she had actually been presented to his wife, that was hardly to be thought of. After the signal service that he had rendered her on the night of her abduction, she supposed she ought to like him; but somehow she did not. His manner was against him, his rich, unctuous voice. He was the kind of man who never for a moment forgot that he was a parson, who set himself up on a pedestal of artificial holiness from which he never stepped down.

Her dislike of the man, however, did not prevent her from asking him about Christopher the first time

she was alone with him. After all, he was her only link with the outside world.

"Have you seen anything of Mr. Hallam, sir, since the day he was here?"

"Why, my dear young lady, no. Nor am I likely to," the parson said. "Our ways lie apart. He, as I understand, is in the service of the Duke of Ormond, and I minister unto the poor and lowly." He paused, looking at her with a sort of ponderous archness. "You still have an—er—an interest in this young man?"

"I think he has been very ill-used," Nancy said. "My father is so exceedingly bitter against him, and he has been given no chance to state his case. It doesn't seem right to condemn him unheard."

"But your father has reason for his bitterness. The young man was one of your abductors—that is beyond doubt."

"He acted in innocence," Nancy said. "He was deceived. I *know* he was. Oh, you may smile, sir, but I am sure of it. I have seen him several times since then, and he has told me the whole story. His behavior has always been that of a gentleman, too. Most scrupulously so, sir."

"Ah, youth!" the parson sighed; and Nancy could have smacked his face. "But if that's how you feel," he went on presently, "I'll see what I can do."

"Why—what could you do, sir?"

"I might search the young man out, and see what he has to say for himself. If he's in the service of his

Grace of Ormond, it shouldn't be difficult to find him. Or to learn his antecedents, either—all about him. Do you wish me to do so?"

Now, instead of smacking the man, Nancy could have embraced him. His next words, however, effectually dampened her enthusiasm.

"But I must speak to your father first," he said. And seeing her look of disappointment, he waxed heavily parsonical. "Nay, my dear young lady, you wouldn't have me conspire with you behind his back, surely? Far be it from me to come between a father and his daughter."

Nancy shrugged her shoulders and said no more. Doubtless the man meant well; she was prepared to believe that he had a heart of gold. The pity was that he had the head of an ass set on top of it. Speak to her father, indeed! . . . .

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## F O U R T E E N

### *The Fateful Contract*

IT is to be feared that Nancy underrated the parson's capacity. For he not only went to her father, but in a very short space of time won over that irascible gentleman to his own way of thinking. He began by sitting down opposite Mr. Edwards and tapping him impressively on the knee.

"My friend, I have something to say to you. I've just been speaking with your daughter. She's fretting out her heart for that young man Hallam."

"My God! Don't I know it? I've argued and reasoned with her till I'm hoarse in the throat, but she won't listen to me. The wench is mad—clean crazy!"

"Why, it's only natural. Youth is youth, my friend. He's a taking young rascal, and she sees few men cooped up here in the Tower."

Mr. Edwards delivered himself of a homily on the wickedness of young men in general, and of Christopher in particular. The parson heard him out, and then shook his head.

"I'm not so sure," he said. "He's not been proved a rogue, you know."

"Not been proved one? God in Heaven! He abducted the girl, didn't he?"

"He says he did not, and Mistress Nancy is persuaded that he speaks the truth."

The old man gestured contemptuously, and the parson leaned forward and tapped him on the knee again.

"Listen, my friend. I'm going to presume to advise you on this matter. If my words displease you, I'll ask your pardon; but I feel that I must speak. And what I have to say is this. You are doing no good by keeping your daughter shut up in the Tower. It's no way to treat a lass of spirit. She'll rebel, and you'll have trouble with her again, sure as fate. Why don't you find her a husband—marry her off to someone?"

"Find her a husband? But who—where? Would you have me marry her to one of the turnkeys?"

"Why not this young man Hallam? He offered to marry her. If we can prove him honest, why not let him have her? Mistress Nancy likes him, that's plain."

This was too rapid an about-face for Mr. Edwards to make, however. After having thought nothing but evil of Christopher for weeks, he could not regard him as a prospective son-in-law all in a moment.

"But confound it—the fellow—he abducted her," he stammered.

"That," said the parson sententiously, "remains to be proved. There's this in his favor, mark you. He's in the service of the Duke of Ormond, and his Grace is not one to use a man who plays fast and loose with women."

"Ay, that's true," Mr. Edwards nodded.

"To be sure, you won't take him back on trust," the other went on, pressing his point. "He must be questioned most narrowly, and made to prove his innocence. And we shall want something more than his bare word. If his story is true, there must be people who know it. Let him produce them."

"They'll need to be trustworthy witnesses, too," Edwards said grimly. "Not others of the same kidney as himself."

The parson inclined his head.

"Very good," he said. "Then by your leave, my friend, I'll search him out and put those questions to him. If he cannot answer them, we shall know him for a rogue. If he can—why, you'll still be bound to nothing, but we can think about it further."

Thus it happened that on the morrow, when Christopher returned to his lodging after eating his midday meal, he found the parson waiting for him on the doorstep.

"Good-day to you, sir," the latter said gravely. "I should like to have a word with you in private, if you'll be so obliging."

"By all means," Christopher agreed; and wondering what the deuce the man could have to say to him, he led the way to his room. "Now, sir," he said when the door was shut, "I am at your service."

The parson cleared his throat.

"I am come, sir, as a—well, maybe I'd better let you have it straight—I am come as an inquisitor. I've been sent to ask you certain questions."

"To ask me certain questions? You have been sent to do it? By whom, pray?"

"By Mr. Talbot Edwards."

Christopher bowed. "In that case, sir, you may consider me doubly at your service."

The parson nodded, and looked at him thoughtfully for a moment.

"Very well, then," he said. "Some time ago, as you are aware, Mistress Nancy Edwards was decoyed from the Tower by a false letter. You were among her abductors. I saw you there myself, and, indeed, you admit it. Can you explain that, sir?"

"I can easily explain it," Christopher said—and did so, giving the history of his connection with my Lord Rochester from beginning to end. "I acted like a fool, no doubt," he admitted, "but I was not intentionally a villain. And at the time I was desperate; I would have done anything to please his lordship."

"H'm," the parson murmured. "It is a remarkable story; but it has the ring of truth, I grant you. I haven't the honor of his lordship's acquaintance, but it accords well with what I have heard of him. Still—you won't misunderstand me, sir, when I ask you this. Have you any witnesses to prove it?"

"I can prove that I spoke to people about it on the day after it happened. Signor Masoni, for one—the keeper of a fencing school near Lincoln's Inn Fields."

"Signor Masoni?" The parson took out a writing tablet and made a note of the name. "An Italian, I take it. Is he a friend of yours?"

"I was employed at his fencing school for more than three months," Christopher said. "He knows all about my Lord Rochester; we have often argued the matter over together." He could not help wondering what Peter would think at receiving a visit from a parson, all the same.

"Very good, I'll see the man. And if his story supports yours, we'll take it as proven. So much for that, then; here's another question. Who are you, sir? You are no Londoner, that is plain. What is your standing, and from what part of the country do you come?"

"From Yorkshire. I am a son of Sir John Hallam, of Fulwood Manor, near Sheffield—a younger son."

"A younger son? H'm!"

"My elder brother," Christopher said, "is at present the Lord of the Manor. He is a cripple—an invalid. Er—he is not, in fact, expected to live long, and I am his heir."

"Then he has no children?"

"No, nor likely to have any. He's not even married; he has been crippled from childhood."

"I see. . . . Well, I imagine you will have been able to guess the purport of all these questions, young man. But I warn you, if you want to pay court to Mr. Edwards' daughter, you'll have to eat very humble pie to him."

"I'd do anything in the world to win his esteem," Christopher declared.

"The last time you were there you asked him for her hand in marriage."

"I did," Christopher replied in a firm tone.

"And do you still mean to marry her? To make her the lady of your house in Yorkshire when you inherit it?"

"If she will so honor me, I shall certainly marry her," Christopher said.

The parson thought for a while.

"Good!" he said at last. "Well, I'll not hide from you, young man, that you have made a favorable impression on me. I believe your story is true, and that you were more sinned against than sinning. And if this Italian fellow bears you out, tomorrow morning I'll go to the Tower and see Mr. Edwards. I can promise you nothing, mind—not so much as that he'll have you inside his door. But I'll do my best for you, and later in the day I'll come back here and let you know how the land lies."

With that he rose to go, waving aside Christopher's protestations of gratitude.

"Nay, friend, don't thank me yet. Leave it until tomorrow. Maybe you'll feel more like cursing me then—wait and see."

On the morrow, then, the parson went to the Tower again, and remained for a long time in debate with Mr. Talbot Edwards. At first their conversation was of war and battles, and it was only when the old gentleman had been brought to a high pitch of good humor by describing his martial experiences that the parson ventured to broach the matter about which he had come.

"That young man Hallam," said he. "I saw him yesterday."

"Ah!" Mr. Edwards frowned deeply. "And what did he say?"

"Well, on my word, I believe the lad is honest. He was deceived by my Lord Rochester, I am persuaded of it. I didn't take his bare word for it; I saw another man, a fencing master with whom he used to work, and he bore out his story in every particular."

"And what is his story?" Edwards asked.

With much abuse of my Lord Rochester, the parson told him, embroidering the narrative here and there with an addition of his own. "I can't see that you've anything against him," he went on. "The blame was Rochester's from beginning to end. And another thing, my friend: he's the heir to an estate, *and* to a baronetcy. If your daughter marries him, she'll be my lady one day soon."

"Ay, she was saying something about that. But do you think his intentions toward her are honest?"

"I do indeed think so," the parson said earnestly. "And I think you are wrong to keep them apart. You'll have no peace in your home, my friend, until you let those two come together again—I'm convinced of it."

Mr. Edwards sighed.

"Maybe you're right," he said. "I don't know. The thing is, will he marry her? How can we be sure? I've had these young sparks after her before, but they didn't mean marriage."

"I think he does mean marriage. I asked him, and he gave me his word for it. But we can make sure, and I'll tell you how. We'll draw up a marriage contract, and have it all signed and sealed before you let him in. Signed in the presence of witnesses, d'ye see —so as to be binding on him in law. He won't dare to break that."

"But, Lord above!" Edwards gasped. "The girl—you don't know her. She'd take it as an insult; she'd never agree to such a thing."

"She need never know—nor yet her mother. Tell them that you're going to admit the man again, and no more. Keep the contract a secret. You won't need to use it unless he balks at marrying her, and they'll never find out."

"I don't like it," the old man said, after a pause.

"But why not, my friend? See now: if he comes here again, it is as her avowed suitor. Then he can't object to putting the terms of the marriage into writing. Or if he does, then we shall know that marriage is not his intention. It will put him to the proof."

"But what's going to be set down in the contract?" Edwards asked. "And who's to write it? None of your lawyer sharks—I'd sooner truckle with the devil!"

The parson made light of that difficulty, however.

"I know a young man who's a scrivener by trade," he said. "Tom Hunt, one of my congregation. He'll write it out for us, all in due and proper form—and make no charge for it, either. I'll bring him here with me as a witness, and another of my friends too. A

man's signature must have two witnesses; that's the law."

And so it was arranged. Mr. Edwards made other objections, but the parson always gained his way in the end. Had Christopher been there to see, he would have been amazed at the zeal with which his cause was pleaded. Soon only one thing remained to be decided—the place where the contract was to be signed. If it was to be kept a secret from the ladies of the household, some place had to be found where they were not likely to go. Finally Mr. Edwards had a flash of inspiration.

"The jewel room!" he said. "Why not there? If you ring the bell when you come, they'll take you for ordinary visitors. And once we are inside and get the door shut, nobody can interrupt us."

The parson nodded doubtfully.

"Ay, there's the jewel room. It would do, I suppose. But I tell you frankly, I don't like the place. It reminds me of the seizure my poor wife had. She hasn't properly got over it yet. Still, it would suit our purpose; that's true enough."

Afterwards they had some discussion as to the terms of the contract; but as neither had much knowledge of legal documents, it was decided to leave that to the good judgment of Tom Hunt, the scrivener. All that mattered was that Christopher should be strictly bound to offer marriage to the young lady.

"Well," said the parson at last, "I can't stay here all day, my friend. There's nothing more to be thought

of, is there? . . . What's the time? Just on midday. If I hurry, maybe I can catch Tom Hunt at his dinner."

Christopher, meanwhile, was in a state of alternate hope and fear—torn between excitement, impatience, and uncertainty. He had made up his mind that he would never see Nancy again, and now, in the most amazing way, this unknown parson had come to his rescue. His gratitude to the man knew no bounds. It was plainly he who had influenced Mr. Edwards towards a reconciliation; and if ever it were brought about, if he ever married Nancy, Christopher was determined that Parson Andrews should be the man to marry them. He would tolerate no one else.

In the meantime, there was nothing to be done but to await the parson's return. Situated as he was, he found it almost unendurable, but happily the wait was not a long one. The man appeared at his lodging on the following afternoon.

"Well, I've seen the old man again, and had it out with him," he said. "He'll accept you as his daughter's suitor, but upon a condition."

"What condition?"

"That you sign a contract forthwith, agreeing to marry her."

Christopher stared at him in surprise.

"But, my good sir, I haven't asked her to marry me yet," he said. "How if she won't have me?"

The parson shrugged his shoulders.

"It's for you to see that she does. If she won't—well, then the contract can't be enforced against you.

There's no law that can make a man marry a woman against her will. But if you go there, you are bound to offer her marriage; that's how it stands."

Christopher thought for a while. It seemed an extraordinary arrangement, but, after all, it would make very little difference to him. He would have asked Nancy to marry him in any case, and if she did so, he would have endowed her with all his worldly goods as a matter of course. They could hardly ask more than that of him.

"When is this contract to be signed?" he asked.  
"Who will draw it up?"

"A friend of mine will draw it up for us—Tom Hunt, a scrivener. You are to sign it in the old man's presence when we go there. We'll go on Monday morning, if it is agreeable to you—four days hence. Can you meet us at Charing Cross at seven o'clock?"

"Seven in the morning?" Christopher said. "Why, it will hardly be daylight."

"There'll be light enough by the time we reach the Tower. Anyway, that was the hour he fixed. He wants to get it over before the business of the day begins."

Seven o'clock in the morning was the last time that Christopher would have chosen for such an expedition, but he had no positive reason to urge against it. And he had every reason, on the other hand, for humoring Mr. Edwards.

"I'll be there," he said. "I'd be there if he wanted me to come at midnight. How many shall we be? You and I and who else?"

"Tom Hunt will go along with us with the deed, and we must have another—a second witness. I thought of taking Mr. Parett, my church warden, but anybody will do. You'll soon be rid of us; when the deed is signed, and after we've drunk your healths, maybe, we shall all be off. Then you'll be alone with your lady-love."

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## FIFTEEN

### *Blood Strikes Again*

AT seven o'clock on the Monday morning, then, Christopher met the parson at Charing Cross. He was not feeling his best, for he had been out with Downing during the earlier part of the night, and had only gone to bed about three hours before. Fortunately it was a clear, frosty morning, and the keen air braced his nerves and whipped some color into his cheeks. He arrived at the rendezvous in good time, and found the parson and his friends awaiting him there.

He looked at the strangers with some curiosity. One was a young fellow of about his own age, and the other a man of thirty-eight or forty. Neither was armed, so far as he could see, and both were very soberly clad. The clothes they wore were no doubt suitable to a church warden and a scrivener, but to Christopher's eye they had somewhat too Puritanical a look. As the parson had seen fit to don a long cassock on top of his ordinary attire, the general appearance of the party was one of unrelieved gloom.

"Ah, here you are, then," the parson said. "And here *we* are, all ready and waiting for you. It's most unbecoming that the bridegroom should be the last

to arrive. If I were to mention it to Mr. Edwards, I vow, there'd be no marriage."

"From the look of you," Christopher retorted, "I should have thought it a funeral we were going to, rather than a marriage."

"Nay, no funeral today, we'll hope. See now, Tom has the deed in his bag yonder." Christopher had already noticed that the younger of the two strangers was carrying a portentous looking black bag. "Will you have him read it through now, or wait till we get to the Tower?"

"Oh, we'll wait, I think," Christopher said. Since he would have to sign the contract in any case, the reading of it seemed immaterial. "It's so plaguey cold, and I don't want to inconvenience these gentlemen more than need be."

The parson thereupon presented his two friends—first Mr. Parrett, the church warden and elder of the pair, then Tom Hunt, the scrivener. Christopher having expressed his gratitude for their assistance and kindly interest on his behalf, they all set off for the Tower.

There were not many people in the streets at that time of the morning, and the few whom they saw paid no attention to them. The parson took advantage of this to point out to Christopher the seriousness of the step he was taking. He spoke at length on the sanctity of the marriage tie and the lack of respect for it that was everywhere apparent—a discourse which lasted, with short intervals, until they

came in sight of the Tower. There he paused and appeared to reflect.

"We won't go in at the Byward Gate," he said, "but by the other—the Iron Gate, at the end of the wharf yonder. It's better at this time of day."

Why it should be better, when the Byward Gate stood open before them and to reach the other they had to go round to the far side of the Tower, Christopher could not understand. He made no objection, however, but followed patiently where he was led. They walked along the water front, and at last came to a halt beneath the frowning battlements of the Iron Gate.

Here a curious thing happened. Outside the gate a group of horses was standing, with two men in charge of them. And one of those two men, Christopher saw with astonishment, was his old friend Ury Gaunt.

"Lord!" He clutched at the parson's arm. "That man there—the one with the twitching face—I know him! His name is Gaunt, and he's one of Colonel Blood's men. I owe him a grudge, too, by Gad! I'll—"

He would have gone after Ury there and then had not the parson dragged him to a halt.

"What man, my friend? With the horses there? He's one of Blood's men, you say? Impossible!"

"He is, I tell you! And I'm going to take him."

"To take him? My dear young man, we can't take him into the Tower with us. Let us have no violence, I beseech you! This is an occasion of peace. See, he's away now—running."

Finding that he was observed, Uriah had taken to his heels. Christopher watched him disappear round a corner, and then, rather regretfully, turned back towards the gate. The warder on duty there evidently knew the parson well, for he saluted him familiarly and made no attempt to challenge them.

"Is it Talbot Edwards you're after again?" he asked. "Why, sir, he'll still be in bed. Work doesn't begin at the jewel house for an hour or more yet."

"Just so; and that's why I'm here so early—to catch him before work begins," the parson said. "He'll be up, for he's expecting me. We've a little matter of business to settle. I won't tell you what it is, but you'll be hearing of it later."

They passed on, and after sundry devious windings, during which the parson several times paused to exchange a word with other acquaintances, arrived at the door of the Martin Tower. It stood wide open, and Christopher judged that some member of the family, if not Mr. Edwards himself, must be out of bed. Hoping that it might be Nancy, he looked eagerly round for some sign of her; but none was to be seen. The parson seemed to divine what was passing in his mind, for he chuckled softly.

"Nay, you can't expect your lady-love to rush out and greet you," he said. "Not yet; you must have patience awhile. Let's see, now—how'd we best arrange it? It's going to be none too easy. Will you remain out here, and let us first go in alone?"

"Remain out here?" Christopher said. "Why?"

"It will be better so. There's this contract to be read over to him. He hasn't seen it yet; Tom only wrote it out yesterday. Your presence would aggravate him; he couldn't speak his mind so freely—d'ye see? And he'll have a good deal to say, you may be sure."

Christopher hesitated. He saw the other's point. Mr. Edwards would probably be calmer, and act more reasonably, in his absence. But he disliked the idea of remaining outside alone—waiting on the doorstep, as it were.

"Trust me, my friend," the parson urged. "I shan't fail you. I haven't brought you so far to see you go away again empty-handed. Stay out here and keep watch for us. Stop everyone who offers to come in—say that we're engaged on urgent business that admits of no interruption."

Very unwillingly, therefore, Christopher suffered himself to be left behind, and the rest of the party went in without him. Passing along the corridor, they presently came to the door of the jewel room.

"That's the place," the parson whispered, "behind the door there. You stay here while I find the old man." He advanced to the foot of the stone staircase and rang the bell. "Hallo, there!" he called softly. "Awake, Mr. Edwards?"

Sounds were soon heard of someone descending from above, and ere long the figure of Talbot Edwards appeared round the bend of the stairs

"Ah, it's you," he said. "On my word, you're bright and early! You said you would be, but I hardly—"

"S-sh!" The parson checked him with uplifted hand. "I have young Hallam here—he's waiting outside. What of Mistress Nancy? Is she still in bed?"

"She's still in her room," Edwards replied nervously, "but she might come out any moment. She often takes the air of a morning."

"The more need for haste, then," the parson said. "Let's get into the jewel room; she'll never look for us there. See, here are my friends—the two I've brought for witnesses: Tom Hunt and Mr. Parrett."

Having acknowledged the salutations of the two strangers, Mr. Edwards took a massive bunch of keys from his pocket and moved toward the door. It was of oak, sheathed with iron, and secured by three great bolts as thick as a man's wrist, each of which was fastened by a huge padlock. He unlocked them carefully and with the fumbling deliberation of age, the others standing behind and watching him. At length, the last padlock was undone, the last bolt thrust back, and with a groan and a creak the heavy door swung open. The sight that met their eyes within was such that two of the party, Hunt and Parrett, cried out in amazement.

Straight before them, in a recess in the opposite wall, set on a sloping surface covered with crimson velvet, and protected only by thin wire netting, shone the Crown Jewels of England. And shine they liter-

ally did, for it chanced that at that moment, a ray of the morning sun, peeping in through the heavily barred window, poured upon them a flood of golden light. All were there: the crown, orb, and scepter in the middle, and the smaller objects grouped around them—the fountains and the saltcellars, the gilded spurs, eagles, swords, and staffs, ablaze with jewels every one, and twinkling in the sunlight like so many living fires.

They went into the room one by one, the parson going last and closing the door behind him. There was another bolt on the inside, smaller than those without, but strong enough to withstand anything short of the assault of a battering ram. He shot it home with a grunt of satisfaction.

"There," he said, "now we're safe. We've been a long time getting here, but we've won through at last."

Something in the way the words were spoken, some subtle change in his voice, caused Mr. Edwards to turn and look at him. He found that the man's face had changed also. It seemed to have grown younger; the grave, parsonical look had disappeared from it, and the eyes sparkled with malicious mockery. He drew back uncertainly, trying to edge toward the door, but as he moved away, the parson laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Not so fast, my friend, not so fast," said he. "I grieve to have to tell you, for we've been a very David and Jonathan these last few days, you and I—I

grieve to have to tell you, but so far as you are concerned the game is up." He spoke the last four words slowly and distinctly, in the manner of one giving a signal; then he seized the old man by the throat and hurled him to the floor.

"Quick, Tom!" he said in a savage whisper. "The gag, lad!"

Forcing Mr. Edwards' jaws apart with the blade of a knife, Hunt thrust a gag into his mouth. It consisted of a wooden plug wrapped round with cloth, and was held in place by a pair of leather thongs that fastened at the back of his head. Parrett, meanwhile, occupied himself in securing the victim's nose. This was done with a piece of iron bent into the form of a spring, whereby his nostrils were compressed as tightly as by a pair of pincers. That he might not be altogether choked by this assortment of implements, a small hole had been bored in the center of the plug, through which with great difficulty he was able to draw his breath. Finally his arms were tied together behind his back; then the parson rolled him over and spoke to him.

"Now," he said genially, "before we go any farther, old friend, you'd better know who's who and what's what. As to that, I must plead guilty to having deceived you a trifle. In the first place, I'm not a Doctor of Divinity, and my name is not Andrews. Blood, it is—Thomas Blood. Colonel Blood, in fact."

A tremor passed over his victim's frame, and he chuckled.

"Ah, you've heard of me, I see. Then listen to what I say. It's no good trying to resist; the door is fast, and nobody can get in, no matter what you do. You can guess what we've come for—your jewels. We're going to take them all, old friend—crown, orb, scepter, every damned bauble of the lot. We don't want to hurt you; lie there quietly, and you'll be safe. But do anything to bring trouble on us, and we'll show you no mercy. I mean it, mind. I'm Colonel Blood—be warned!"

Flinging a cloak over the prostrate man's head, he turned toward the jewels. His companions were at them already, tearing aside the protective cover of wire netting.

"Steady lads, steady!" he admonished them. "There's no hurry—devil a bit. Our young friend is on guard outside—what more d'ye want? And he'll serve again to win us clear. Even if there should be an alarm, they'll hardly arrest a servant of the Duke of Ormond, and we shall be of a party with him."

The wire was pulled away, and the conspirators eagerly seized upon what lay beneath. Blood himself picked up the crown and thrust it under his cassock. Conceiving that its bulk would betray its presence there, however, he took it out again, and producing a small mallet that was hidden away on his person, set to work to hammer it down to a more convenient size.

"The kings of England must have had curiously large heads," he remarked, "considering the allow-

ance of brain that history credits them with. What's wrong, Tom? Won't it go in?"

"No, it's too long," said Hunt, who had for some time been trying to force the scepter into the black bag that he had brought to hold Christopher's marriage contract.

"Then file it in two," Blood told him. "You've got a file, haven't you? It'll eat through that soft gold like cheese."

He continued his hammering, and the Black Prince's ruby, disturbed from its setting, rolled away. Parrett paused in the act of cramming the orb into the slack of his Puritanical breeches to pick it up and put it in his pocket. Mr. Edwards, meanwhile, bound and gagged though he was, had managed to struggle to his feet. He was unable to utter a sound, and the cloak that Blood had thrown over his head half-blindfolded him, yet still he strove to give the alarm. He had actually reached the door, and was trying to open it—beating upon it with his knees, and pushing at the bolt with his head—before any of the conspirators noticed him.

"By Heaven!" Hunt said suddenly. "Look ye there! Look at the old man!"

"Curse him!" Blood growled. "The old fool! Well, I warned him—he's had his chance."

And whirling aloft his mallet, he brought it down on the top of Edwards' head and felled him again. The cloak that covered him had slipped aside, and they saw his face—white and distorted, the eyes wide

open and staring, and the chin covered by a trickle of bloody froth from his gagged mouth. While they stood looking at him he tried to rise once more. He did not want for courage, that old Cavalier.

"By the bones of the devil!" Blood said. "Is there nothing will quiet him?" And he struck the old man a second time, so savagely that even his associates cried out in protest.

"Let him be!" Hunt said, clutching at his leader's arm. "An old man like that—would ye kill him?"

"Not with this mallet, boy; it's too light. But I'll make him keep quiet."

"Well, he's quiet enough now. He's gone off into a swoon."

"Or is he foxing?" Blood said. "I'll make sure." And, taking out a small dagger, he deliberately pricked Edwards in the rump. "You're right, Tom; he lies still. Bah! He's a sorry sight. But I'll say this for him: he's a man. There are not many who'd have done what he did. I don't think I've killed him—I hope not."

Whether killed or not, Edwards now lay motionless as a corpse, and the conspirators needed him no more, but turned back to the jewels. Having reduced the crown to about half its original size by beating in the arches, Blood hid it inside his cassock again. Parrett stowed away the orb and most of the smaller objects, and soon all was disposed of except the scepter. This, Hunt was still industriously sawing in two, every stroke of his file sending forth a shower of gold-

en particles to glitter in the sunlight. While the others stood watching him, a sudden sound of voices was heard outside.

"S-sh! What's that?" Blood whispered. "Somebody's coming in. If he sees that the padlocks on the outside of the door are undone we're lost. Come, leave that accursed thing, Tom! We've got all the rest—let's be off."

He gave a pat or two to his false beard, pulled his parsonical hat well over his eyes, and turned.

"Now mind this, both of you," he said warningly. "We go out with long faces—dev'lish disappointed. Old Edwards won't agree to the contract; that's our story. You're to write out another one, Tom, and we're coming here again. He'll take it ill, I wager, but no matter—leave him to me."

Christopher, all this time, was cooling his heels outside the door—and cooling them in the literal sense of the word, for he found the morning air exceedingly chill. He saw his three companions go in at the door, and heard the bell ring and the parson's voice addressing Mr. Edwards; but after that, save that once he fancied there was a sound of hammering, all within the Martin Tower was quiet. There were plenty of life and movement outside, however. A squad of soldiers was being drilled on the green, and other inmates of the fortress went to and fro about their duties. Several of them looked curiously at him from afar, but none took the trouble to come and speak to him.

For some time, he stood still beside the door; then, to keep himself warm, he began to walk about. The reading of the contract was taking a confoundedly long time, he thought. It was to be hoped that Mr. Edwards would agree to it, and put no further difficulties in his way. To have to leave without seeing Nancy, after coming so near to her, would be the last straw.

Suddenly, in the midst of his perambulations, he came to a halt. A figure had appeared in the doorway of the Tower, and was standing and looking at him. It was Nancy herself! Finding his eyes upon her, she drew back and made as if to retreat within. Then, seeming to think better of it, she came forward again. Christopher went eagerly to meet her, hat in hand.

"Nancy!" he cried. "Is it all settled? May I come in? Have they sent you for me?"

She allowed him to take her hand, and to keep it rather longer, perhaps, than courtesy demanded; but he thought her welcome of him was less rapturous than it might have been. Her chief emotion seemed not to be delight, but surprise.

"Christopher, what are you doing here?" she asked breathlessly. "If my father knew—nay, there's no need for you to kiss *all* my fingers, sir—if my father knew, I believe he would call out the guard."

"But he does know," Christopher said. "He must know. My friends are inside now, arranging it with him."

Nancy did not appear to understand what he said.  
"Your friends? You mean Doctor Andrews, the parson? I heard his voice just now. But what is he arranging?"

At that it was Christopher's turn to be surprised. He gazed at her in sheer amazement. Was it possible that she had not been told? How could one sign a contract to marry a girl without her having consented to it?

"Arranging what with my father, sir?"

"The—er—the matter of the contract," he told her.

"What contract?" she said at once, and when he stood silent she laughed. "What's the matter with you, Christopher? Has the sight of me struck you dumb? Am I so very terrifying?"

Terrifying, thought Christopher—she was adorable beyond words. But what the devil was he to say to her? He had never spoken of marrying her, never so much as mentioned the word in her presence.

"Come, sir!" She smiled at him encouragingly. "Doctor Andrews is arranging something with my father, you say—some contract. But what is it? Does it concern *you*?"

"It is a contract of marriage," Christopher blurted out. "It was an arrangement between the parson and your father. They said I must sign it, or I could never see you again."

At first Nancy simply stared, but presently understanding came to her. She stiffened and drew back

from him, the color flaming into her cheeks.

"A contract of marriage?" she said. "You mean—" It was obvious what he meant, and for a while she was stricken into silence. "And you have agreed to it?" she asked at length. "You would have signed it—unknown to me, behind my back?"

Christopher tried to possess himself of her hand again, but she jerked it away as though the touch of him were poisonous.

"You misapprehend me, sir" she said. "I am not a sheep or a bale of merchandise, to be bought and sold. Nor yet am I a slave, to marry any man who will put pen to paper at my father's bidding. The man I marry must—must—" Must woo and win me first, it was on the tip of her tongue to say, but fearing that Christopher might set about doing so there and then, she altered it. "—Must do more than that," she concluded lamely.

"Nancy—my dear, I intended no harm. Can't you see how it was with me? I agreed to sign the thing because I must. I was only to be allowed to see you again on that condition. And I wanted to see you so much that I'd have done anything—signed anything. Don't you believe me?"

She did believe him, of course. She had no doubt that his intentions were honest, that he was willing to marry her. But that did not alter the fact that the contract he had proposed to sign was nothing less than an insult to her. Her consent to it had not been asked; nobody had thought that worthwhile.

They had all taken it for granted that he had merely to be seen to conquer, to appear beneath her father's roof for her to be ready to fall into his arms. It was insufferable—the more so because she had an uneasy feeling that it might be true.

"Nay, sir, I am honored," she said coldly. "It is an honor for any girl to have a man deign to cast his eyes upon her; that is understood. But I must beg you to excuse me, sir. I have no intention of marrying yet. You were not told that *I* had agreed to this contract, surely?"

"Nancy," he cried, "I love you! That is why I am here; that is the reason for everything. Do you suppose I would sign a contract to marry a woman I didn't love? If you don't want to marry me, then I have nothing to say. The choice is yours. But don't let this contract stand between us."

The girl considered for a moment. The choice was hers, as he had said. She could either be kind to him or send him away. And she knew which she would rather do.

"Listen, Christopher," she said presently. "This contract—how *can* I agree to it? How can you wish me to? Think! Once you had signed it there would be no going back. You would be caught in a trap—obliged to marry me, whether you wanted to or not."

"But I should want to," he said. "I love you."

"You think so now, perhaps. But how can you tell—how be sure?"

Christopher would have approached her again, but

Nancy waved him back with a firm gesture.

"No," she said, "stay there. Let us be honest with them. If they told you not to come in, then stay outside. I will go and see my father, and tell him this must be stopped."

"But then I shall never see you again," Christopher cried.

"Yes, yes, you will," she replied, smiling at him. "I promise that you shall."

And she meant it. There was going to be no more of this nonsense; if her father would not listen to reason, she would take the law into her own hands. She had never openly rebelled against his authority before, but there was a limit to her endurance.

She went, and Christopher was left alone again, well nigh beside himself with anxiety. He had little time to meditate upon events, however, for Nancy was barely out of sight before he saw a young man striding towards him. The purposeful manner of his approach indicated that he had some business in hand, and it soon became clear to Christopher that he was going to enter the Martin Tower. He was a tall, slim, good-looking young fellow, well dressed, too, though not in clothes of the London cut. Mindful of the parson's orders, Christopher took up his stand in front of the doorway with the intention of turning him back.

"Your pardon, sir," he said with a bow. "What is your business here?"

"My business?" the other replied, looking at him

in some surprise. "Why, I want Mr. Talbot Edwards, the keeper of the Crown Jewels."

"He is engaged at the moment, sir, and not to be disturbed."

"Engaged? The devil he is!" the young man said. "With whom, pray? And who are you, sir?"

"Never mind who I am. Mr. Edwards is engaged on private business, I say, and is not to be disturbed."

"Is he not? You're deuced peremptory, my friend. Private business, eh? It must be uncommon private if it's going to keep me standing outside my father's house after I've been away from it nearly two years."

"Your father's house?" Christopher said.

"My father's house. A poor house, I grant you, but the best he has. I'm Talbot Edwards the younger, at your service. You've never heard of me? No, very likely not; I've been away soldiering in the Low Countries with my kinsman, Sir John Talbot."

Christopher gazed at him in amazement. He had known in a vague sort of way that Mr. Edwards had a son; Nancy had once or twice mentioned the existence of a brother to him. But he had never visualized him as a concrete being of flesh and blood, still less expected to see him.

"And whether my father is engaged or not, I'm still going in," the young man went on. "I've a mother who'll be wanting to see me, and a sister. They are not engaged in this business, I take it. No? Then if you'll have the goodness to step aside, my dear sir . . ."

Christopher stepped aside with alacrity. The last person with whom he wished to quarrel was Nancy's brother. His appearance at this particular moment was an added complication in a matter that had been over-complicated already. Young Edwards walked towards the door, but just as he reached it, the way was blocked by the parson and his friends coming out.

"The deuce!" he said, drawing back. "More strangers! Who may *you* be?"

"I'm only a chaplain, friend, as you may see," the parson replied mildly.

"And who are the others? They look like a pair of mutes at a funeral. Is my father ill—dead?"

"Your father? You mean Mr. Talbot Edwards?" The parson's face lighted up. "Why, you're never his son—his soldier son! I'm pleased and proud to meet you, sir. Your father has often spoken to me of you—often! No, he's not ill, but as hale and hearty as ever you saw him. Don't let us keep you from him, sir. Go straight in; you'll find him upstairs in his room."

Leaving young Edwards to pass in through the doorway, he walked up to Christopher and laid a hand on his arm.

"You must prepare yourself for a disappointment, lad," he said kindly. "The old man won't accept the contract—not as it stands. The terms are not clear enough, he says. I've tried to reason with him, but it's no good. He will have it done his way."

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## SIXTEEN

### *Confusion Confounded*

CHRISTOPHER knew not whether to laugh or to swear. His patience was at an end; he felt that if he did not do something to relieve his feelings he would burst. After all that had gone before, this ridiculous anticlimax was not to be borne.

"To the devil with the contract!" he said savagely. "I don't care whether the old fool accepts it or not. There'll be none for him to accept, in any case. Mistress Nancy won't have one. I've just been speaking to her, and—let go of me, man!" The parson was urging him gently away. "I'll not stir a step until I've seen her again."

"Come, my friend," the other said, "don't spoil it all. Don't undo all the good we've done for the want of a little patience. We can come again tomorrow. Tom shall write it out afresh, and we'll bring—"

"Mistress Nancy won't have a contract, I tell you! She said she was going to find you, and stop it. Didn't she do so?"

"She did—ay, she did," the parson assented readily. "But what can the poor lass do against her father? See, friend, if you anger him now all is lost. There's that son of his just come in; you'll have him against

you, too. The first thing he'll do will be to call you out for insulting his sister—tampering with her honor, or some such nonsense. Where will you be then?"

Angry though he was, Christopher saw that the man was right. He could not force his way into the Martin Tower in face of the combined opposition of Nancy's father and brother. It was a curse that the latter had turned up so inopportunely, but there was no help for it. The parson was quick to follow up his advantage. Talking volubly, pointing out this and that, and above all urging Christopher to have patience, he led him slowly away—across the corner of the parade ground, past the White Tower, and so on toward the drawbridge. Some time before they reached that, however, a loud shout arose behind them.

"Ho! Treason, treason! Stop thief! Stop thief! The crown is stolen!"

Christopher paused and looked over his shoulder. "What's that?" he asked.

"It's some Popish prisoner," the parson explained. "He has a whim for plaguing the guard with false alarms. Two nights ago, he had them all out by telling them that the Tower was on fire. And a confoundedly damp, cold night it was too, if you remember."

"What did he say just now? That the crown was stolen?"

"Ay, something of the kind. But there's more sense in that than in saying the Tower's on fire. It would

take an uncommon hot fire to burn these stones. Come, let's get on."

In after days Christopher blamed himself for being so easily deceived. Yet, in truth, there was every excuse for him. He was too full of his own troubles to worry over those of the guardians of the Tower. And he had no reason to distrust the parson; on the contrary, he thought that he had every reason to be grateful to him. His story sounded true enough, and the assurance with which it was told was convincing.

Calmly and without hurry, they walked on towards the drawbridge. After the first outcry there was silence behind them for a while, but presently the noise began again with renewed vigor. This time several people were shouting together, and their voices to some extent drowned one another, so that it was difficult to make out what was being said. "Stop thief, stop thief!" Christopher heard again, but no more of the crown, or whatever it was that the thief was alleged to have taken. Just as they reached the guard room the door was thrown open, and an officer and several men rushed out, the former angrily demanding to know what was the matter. The parson instantly told him.

"It's behind there, sir," he said, pointing in the direction from which they had come. "Some of the prisoners must have broken loose, I think. There was talk of them having taken the crown. But Lord! They make such a noise you hardly can hear a word. Hadn't you best take your men, sir, and go and see?"

Shouting to his men to follow, the officer ran off, whereupon the parson seized Christopher by the arm and urged him forward more rapidly.

"Something is wrong," he said. "It's no false alarm, as I thought at first. We'd better get out as quickly as we can. When things go wrong in the Tower, they have a nasty knack of clapping all the strangers they find there under lock and key. None of that for me, if I can help it."

Christopher also had no wish to be detained in the Tower, and he increased his speed without demur. Presently the parson had a fresh idea.

"We might make a trifle more noise," he suggested. "Everyone else is shouting, and it's as well to be in the fashion . . . Oho! Stop thief!" he bellowed, waving his arms energetically. "Come, lads, don't leave it all to me. Treason! Stop thief!"

At the nearer end of the drawbridge a sentry was posted. He eyed them with some suspicion, Christopher thought, but the parson was in no wise intimidated by his black looks. He bore down upon the man unhesitatingly, vociferating the while at the top of his voice.

"Listen, friend!" he shouted, grabbing the startled sentry by the shoulder. "Let nobody go past here, on your life. There's a Papist plot afoot to seize the Tower, murder the king, and heaven knows what besides. Ha—see there!" His pointing forefinger stabbed wildly at the air. "That man—the one that's just

going round the corner! There's a Papist, if ever I saw one. I know the lean, hungry look of the devils."

While the sentry gaped round in search of an imaginary Papist, they pushed past him and across the drawbridge. They were not out of the woods yet, however. At the other end of the bridge was a second sentry, a more intelligent man than his fellow, who stepped forward and leveled his halberd at the parson's breast.

"Halt!" he cried. "Who are you, and where are you goin'?"

"We're going to the Iron Gate, friend, to give them the word there. None may pass, either in or out—that's the order."

"Oh, is it? Then you don't pass, not without an order from the captain of the guard."

"Never mind the captain," the parson said impatiently. "He's back yonder, looking to the Papists who've broken in." And he repeated his story of a Popish plot. "Let us pass, man," he went on. "D'ye want the Tower in their hands, and all our throats cut?"

The sentry hesitated a moment, half-lowered his halberd, and then thrust it back again.

"Nay, you'll stand fast," he said. "You don't go from here until the captain's seen you. You may be Papists yourselves for all I know, and—"

He got no farther than that. Stepping suddenly aside, the parson seized his unwieldy weapon by the

handle and tore it from his grasp. Then, with the butt end of it, he gave the man a blow on the head that sent him sprawling.

"Come!" he cried, hurling the halberd after its owner. "Come—let's away!"

He set off at a run—through the arch at the end of the drawbridge, round the corner, and along the wharf towards the Iron Gate. Hunt and Parrett followed him immediately, but Christopher stood still, looking at the fallen man. A horrid, unbelievable suspicion had come to him. It was more than a desire to escape the inconvenience of being detained in the Tower that had prompted the parson to knock that man down. Nobody in his right mind, and least of all a parson, would assault one of the warders for such a reason as that. What was the cry that he had heard behind him? "The crown is stolen!" Then it must have been stolen from the Martin Tower, which they had just left. Was it possible—was it conceivable—that the parson and his friends had taken it?

The clamor behind him grew and swelled, the sentry whom they had passed at the other end of the bridge gave a loud haloo, and he heard the thud of approaching feet. To remain where he was would be folly, and he turned and ran after the others. By the time he overtook them they were almost at the Iron Gate. The hunt was now fairly up, and a crowd nearly fifty strong was racing down the wharf after them, shouting, brandishing weapons, and calling on them

to stop. Christopher seized the parson by the arm and dragged him to a halt.

"Wait!" he cried breathlessly. "I want the truth of this. What have you done? What's all this outcry about?"

The man turned on him with a snarl, and putting the flat of his hand against his chest, thrust him violently away. And then, when Christopher returned to the attack, an extraordinary thing happened. As he clutched at the parson again, his hand accidentally closed on his beard—the neat gray beard that was the man's most distinguishing feature. There was a slight rending sound, and, to his horror, the beard came away—right away from the face. For a moment Christopher stared at it aghast; then he looked at the face it had hidden. It was one he had seen before, and seen in such circumstances that he would never forget it. It was the face of the man with whom he had fought by torchlight on the occasion of the attack on the Duke of Ormond—the face of Colonel Blood.

The colonel saw that he was recognized, and sprang at him fiercely.

"Be silent, fool!" he hissed. "You'll gain nothing by denouncing me; your own life is at stake as much as mine."

"I don't care!" Christopher said wildly. Then, raising his voice, "Seize this man!" he shouted. "It is Blood—Colonel Blood!"

While speaking, he tried to draw his sword, but before he could get it clear of the scabbard Blood was upon him. For a moment they clawed at each other savagely, and then became locked breast to breast. Christopher sought for a wrestler's grip, and, indeed, found one; but he knew that unless help soon came, it would go hard with him. He was himself strong above the average, but this man was stronger by far. It was like trying to overthrow a bear. The arms that encompassed him might have been bands of steel, and they crushed him against a chest that was as unyielding as a rock. The breath was driven out of him, and his ribs seemed to crack beneath the strain. But he struggled on manfully; he only had to hold the man for a few moments, and his pursuers would arrive. They came just as Christopher tottered backwards, and fell with the colonel on top of him.

What happened after that he hardly knew. He was trodden under foot, kicked and buffeted, and once narrowly escaped being decapitated by a halberd. As soon as he could regain his feet, he looked round for Blood. At first the colonel was not to be seen; the surging mass of his foes completely submerged him. But presently he rose up again; Christopher saw his head and shoulders as he tore himself free and struggled to his feet. His cassock was in shreds, and in his hand he held something that he was using as a weapon—something which shone and glittered in the sunlight.

"The crown!" a score of voices cried, and almost as many hands were outstretched to snatch it from him.

Though he must have known that his plot had failed, Blood still fought desperately to retain his prize. By the time young Talbot Edwards succeeded in wresting it from him, half the jewels in it had fallen out, and were being trampled into the mud of the wharf. Only when it was gone did he cease to struggle, and stood limp and motionless, with his back against the wall and his great arms folded across his chest.

"Enough!" he cried breathlessly. "Take me—take me! I yield myself as your prisoner. No matter; the game is not played out yet. . . . Ho, ho!" he laughed. "It was a gallant attempt—as gallant as any that ever was made, even for a crown."

Simultaneously with the colonel, his two fellow-rogues were captured. More fortunate than he, they both succeeded in getting outside the gate. Parrett, indeed, only went a yard or two beyond it, for he was immediately assailed by three men without. Thinking him an escaping prisoner, they hastened to seize upon him in the hope of earning a reward. Hunt, however, managed to mount one of the horses that Ury Gaunt had in readiness, and it was only by a most amazing stroke of luck that he was taken at all. As he spurred away, he turned round to see what had become of the others, and, not looking where he was going, ran his head against an overhanging beam that projected

from the wall of a neighboring house. The shock hurled him from the saddle, and he lay on the ground half-stunned until he was picked up and carried back.

By the time the two lesser rogues had been brought within the gate and set alongside their leader, the Lieutenant of the Tower appeared—the Sir John Robinson in whose wife's garden Christopher had been wont to meet Nancy. He was a grave, rather self-important man of middle age, very neatly and precisely dressed.

"Make way! Make way!" he cried as he came forward, for the crowd was now so thick that it was almost impossible to approach the prisoners. "Make way, knaves—stand aside! What's the meaning of all this bother?"

Fifty voices clamored in answer; the battered crown was flourished before his eyes, and with it the orb and sundry other articles that had been recovered from Parrett's pockets.

"Silence!" the Lieutenant shouted. "Will you be quiet, fools! Let one man speak, and the rest keep silence."

"I will tell you, sir," Christopher said, stepping forward. "These three men"—he indicated the prisoners—"have just come from the Martin Tower, and somehow—God knows by what dev'lish trick—they have gained possession of the crown and the rest of His Majesty's jewels. One of them—he in the middle there—is Colonel Blood, the man lately concerned in the attack on the Duke of Ormond, sir."

Christopher's intentions were excellent, but his action was very ill-advised. Hitherto, in the excitement of taking the colonel, nobody had paid any attention to him. Had he chosen to slip quietly away, now that the battle was over, probably none would have said him nay. But when he drew attention to himself by speaking, there were not wanting those who remembered having seen him with the robbers.

"Ay, it's Colonel Blood!" somebody cried. "And you were along with him, I'll take my oath on it!"

"I saw him with them," another said. "And I—and I," more voices chimed in; while young Talbot Edwards sprang forward and covered Christopher with a pistol.

"You were certainly with them!" he shouted. "You infernal hound! It was you who tried to stop me from entering, while your fellows were at their devil's work within. And now you stand there as bold as brass, trying to escape by accusing the others."

And then, too late, Christopher realized his danger, his folly in speaking. Blood had warned him that his life was at stake, but he had hardly believed it. He was so innocent of complicity in the plot that it had seemed impossible that any sane person could think him guilty. The idea that Nancy's brother, of all people, should think so rendered him speechless.

Having restored order again, Sir John Robinson confronted him grimly.

"What's this I hear?" he said. "Were you with these men?"

"I—yes, sir, I was with them," Christopher stammered. "But I took no part in their plot. I didn't even know who they were. I came here on a different errand, and I never so much as entered the Martin Tower."

"No, he was left outside to keep guard!" young Edwards said fiercely. "So that they might murder my father without fear of interruption. Bah, the man's a liar! Didn't know who they were, he says. He had Blood's name off pat enough just now."

The Lieutenant nodded.

"Who are you?" he said to Christopher. "What's your name?"

"Hallam, sir—and I am in the service of the Duke of Ormond."

"The Duke of Ormond?" Sir John said bitterly. "My God! And you dare to avow it? We know now how it was that Blood took him. Give up your sword, man—stand alongside the other prisoners!"

Christopher suffered himself to be deprived of his weapons and led over to where Blood and his two companions stood against the wall. When it was done, Sir John addressed himself to the captain of the guard.

"Captain Beckman, you will take these men to the White Tower and lodge them there. Look well to them, above all to the ruffian Blood. If he escapes, the responsibility will be yours. I will question them later, when I have recovered what is left of the jewels."

The dungeon into which the prisoners were put was a room about ten feet square, entirely destitute of furniture, and lighted by a single heavily barred window set high up in the wall. Blood, escorted by nearly a dozen armed men, walked there with an air of contemptuous indifference, darting amused glances at the numerous onlookers who thronged about him. Hunt and Parrett did their best to imitate their leader, but Christopher went with head downcast and every symptom of shame. As soon as the door was closed and they were alone, Blood turned to the others with a laugh.

"Here's a pretty kettle of fish!" said he. "You're nearer to the rope now, my lads, than ever you've been in your lives. You may thank God that you have Colonel Blood at your back, for without me you'd hang for certain. And all because of you," he went on, addressing Christopher. "See now, I might have left you outside the Martin Tower to shoulder all the blame. You were so set on staying that I nearly had to drag you away. I brought you at the risk of my life, and in return for it you betray me." He shook his head sadly. "Eh! It's a hard, ungrateful world."

"Twist his calf's head off—that's what I'd do," Parrett snarled venomously.

"Then do so!" Christopher cried. "Kill me here in this hole—spare me the shame of the gallows—and I'll die blessing you! You, sir—" he turned and faced Blood—"you are stronger than I, and could kill me with your bare hands. I beg that you will do it."

The colonel looked at him curiously.

"Nay, don't talk that way," he said, not unkindly. "You're not dead yet, boy, and you won't die. You'll live to be the lord of your manor in Yorkshire, and in fifty years' time you'll be telling your grandchildren how you once stood in a dungeon alongside Colonel Blood. It's I who should repine, if any of us does. Six weeks' work and the finest plot I ever made have all gone for nothing."

"The finest?" Christopher said. "My God—the finest!"

"The finest. Think, my lad. If that young Edwards hadn't come in when he did we should have walked out with the jewels in our pockets—three men through the midst of a thousand. Is there anyone but Colonel Blood could have done it?"

"Praise God, there is not!" Christopher said fervently.

"It was my Lord Rochester's letter that gave me the idea," the colonel laughed. "I knew all about that letter. I saw it before it came to the Tower! I even knew the day it would arrive. And so, that morning I went with a woman to look at the jewels. A most respectable woman, who earns her living by throwing fits at fairs."

"Throwing fits?" Christopher had heard from Nancy of the affliction of the parson's wife. "So that was a fake, too?"

"To be sure. A matter of being double-jointed, with a morsel of soap in her mouth to make the foam.

I carried her up to the old man's room, and there he showed me the letter. That put me in the way of rescuing his daughter—making a friend of him, d'ye see? One thing led to another; and later, when I wanted an excuse for taking two or three men into the jewel room, *you came in handy.*"

"I think you are the devil," Christopher groaned.

"So many a man has said, my lad. But even the devil has his uses, as you'll find. Come, cheer up; you're not going to hang. Nor I, nor any of us. The rope was never woven that could hang me. Trust me, all of you; do what I say, and—"

"Trust you!" Christopher cried passionately. "You ask that?"

He turned away with a gesture of despair. If the man would not kill him, he was in a mood to dash out his brains against the wall. After the high hopes with which he had set forth that morning, his position now seemed ludicrous—a thing to provoke hysterical mirth. That Blood would save his life, he did not for one moment believe. Nothing could save him; he would hang, and for a crime of which he was as innocent as a babe unborn. He sank down to a sitting posture on the floor and covered his face with his hands.

The colonel, meanwhile, addressed himself to the others.

"We shall have Master Lieutenant here soon," said he. "And when he comes, mark me, mum's the word. I'm not going to account for my misdeeds to the likes

of him. Keep a still tongue, both of you; leave the talking to me."

"But how if he puts us to the question?" Hunt asked uneasily. "He has racks in here, thumb-screws—God knows what."

"Bah! He daren't use 'em—not without an order from the king," Blood said. "This Lieutenant is only a jack-in-office; no word runs here but the king's. That's what I'm counting on. If we answer him nothing, he'll have to go to the king for orders, and it's the king I want to see."

"And what of him?" Hunt said, nodding towards Christopher.

"Tchah! Let him be. He has done all the harm he can, and he may be of some use to us."

A few minutes later Sir John Robinson came in, attended by Captain Beckman and half a dozen soldiers. He began by questioning Christopher, as being the most likely of the four to tell the truth. And, with certain reservations, Christopher did so. He said that he knew nothing of the stealing of the jewels, or of the thieves' purpose in taking them. He had come to the Tower on a matter of business with Mr. Talbot Edwards, accompanied by a man whom he had thought to be Edwards' friend, and two others who were to witness a deed of contract. It turned out that he had been deceived, and that the men with whom he was associated were villains.

"H'm! And you'd have me believe that you're wholly innocent, and know nothing whatsoever of

it?" Sir John said. "What was the nature of your business, then—this contract?"

"That I cannot tell you, sir," Christopher said firmly. Come what may, he was determined that Nancy's name should not be dragged into this.

"I thought as much," the Lieutenant replied. "It's what I expected. You are aware, sir, that this reticence and false speaking will go very much against you?"

Christopher turned away his eyes and said nothing.

"If there's any truth in his story of a contract, it will be possible to find out from Mr. Edwards, sir," Captain Beckman suggested. "He is still alive, and is now conscious, so his son tells me."

Sir John stood for a moment in thought, and then turned his attention to Blood.

"Now, sir, what of you?" he asked. "You are the notorious Colonel Blood, eh? You admit it?"

"I am Thomas Blood, sir, sometime colonel in the Lord Protector's army. As to being notorious—I don't like the word. It has an evil sound. But I have some small claim to fame, perhaps. There's a reward of a thousand guineas for my head. It used to be but a beggarly five hundred—an insult, I thought, to a man with my record. I might have been a down-at-heels Toby-man. Of all the miserly, nip-cheese—"

"Yes, yes!" Sir John snapped. "Never mind that. I want to hear your account of today's happening."

Blood shook his head. "Nay, that's for your master to ask," said he.

"My master? What do you mean, man? I am master

here—the Lieutenant of the Tower."

"Oh? Are the jewels that I stole yours, then—your own property?"

"They are His Majesty's, sir, as you know full well."

"Then to His Majesty will I explain myself—to him and none other. Take me before him, and I'll speak; otherwise I am dumb. What the devil? If I steal a man's goods, must I render an account of it to his lackey?"

"Listen, sir!" the Lieutenant said angrily. "Within the Tower gates I represent His Majesty. I have the same power that the justices have in the city—authority to try all cases whatsoever, and in particular those which involve breaches of the peace."

"Try on, then," Blood told him. "I won't say a word, either to accuse myself or in my defense."

"Won't you? Don't be too sure, my good colonel. We have means at our disposal for making people speak."

"I don't doubt it," Blood said with a laugh. "But be careful, my friend, be careful. It's easy to make a man speak, but to control his speech—to make him say what you want, and only so much—is another matter. Think, man! I'm Colonel Blood; I've had a finger in every plot that has been hatched for the last dozen years. If I confessed all I knew, you'd have half the gentlemen in London at each other's throats. Your own neck would be no safer than mine."

"What? You threaten me! You—a prisoner!"

"No, I warn you. You are a mighty man in the Tower, but there are mightier still without. Beware of the hornet's nest you may raise about your ears. There are some secrets, master, that are best left untold."

Sir John stood silent for a while, evidently much disturbed. Then he tried questioning the other prisoners. These, however, maintained a sullen and impenetrable silence. They would not even give their names, but stood before him like a pair of deaf mutes. Finding, after repeated trials, that neither could be induced to utter a word, he turned wrathfully to Blood again.

"Very good," he said. "Since you all refuse to speak, I'll go to His Majesty and obtain a warrant to make you."

"You'll get no such warrant, my friend. Tell him what I said: that I'll plead to none but him. And tell all the others you see that if I'm put to the torture, I'll confess everything. You'll find plenty of people waiting to hear the news, and some of them very long-faced about it."

"Before I go I'll see that you don't escape, and cheat the gallows that way!" Sir John said savagely. "Captain Beckman, put irons on these men, all of them. Do it now, in my presence. I'll lock the door myself, and take the key with me to Whitehall."

"Ho, ho!" Blood laughed. "See that the irons are strong, Captain! We are most desperate fellows. And

the window there—hadn't you better have it walled up? It wouldn't take more than half a day, and what's that when Colonel Blood is at stake?"

"You will post sentries outside the door and window," the Lieutenant said to Beckman, at which Blood laughed the more.

It was far different with Christopher. Everything that happened, every fresh move, seemed but to add to the ignominy of his position. As the heavy fetters were fastened about his wrists, a bitterness as of death settled on him. His one hope was that Sir John Robinson's mission to the king would prove a failure, and that they would be hanged without more ado—put quietly out of the way. To appear before the king alongside Colonel Blood would be worse than any hanging.

When the prisoners had been secured, Captain Beckman and the soldiers filed out of the room. Sir John himself remained behind for a moment. Amidst a fire of sarcastic comment from Blood, he examined the state of the door, and finally closed and locked it with his own hands. They heard a rattle of arms as the sentries took up their positions outside, and then all was still.

Removing himself as far from the others as the size of the dungeon permitted, Christopher huddled down into a corner and gave himself up to his gloomy thoughts. For some time, Blood and his companions continued to talk, but at length either weariness or the gloom of the place overcame even them, and they

sank into silence. The colonel, indeed, fell asleep, for at intervals the quiet was disturbed by his snores. How he could sleep in such circumstances, with the shadow of the gallows almost resting upon him, Christopher did not know. Sleep? He would never close his eyes again until he closed them forever.

At last, after what seemed an infinity of time, they heard a sound of footsteps and voices outside their prison. Blood sprang up and looked eagerly toward the door. There was the rattle and creak of the key being turned, and Sir John Robinson came in, attended as before by Captain Beckman and a number of soldiers.

"Well?" said the colonel. "You've been a confoundedly long time, but here you are at last. What's the verdict?"

"His Majesty's orders are that you are to be taken to Whitehall, where he will pass judgment on you in person."

Blood laughed triumphantly.

"I knew it!" he cried. "I'd have staked my last farthing on it! Indeed, I was staking more—my life, and the lives of us all. Come, my bully boys! Rouse yourselves; we're for the king!"

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## SEVENTEEN

### *The Royal Prerogative*

BY this time the story of the attempt on the crown had got abroad, and all London was agog with the news. Had the prisoners been taken to Whitehall by road, the streets would probably have been so packed with sightseers that they would have had difficulty in getting there. Sir John Robinson suspected, indeed, that Blood was relying on that to make his escape. Among the crowds, there would doubtless be many of his sympathizers, and these might band themselves together to attack the escort. If such were his design, the lieutenant determined to frustrate it by taking him to Whitehall by water. First of all, before removing the prisoners from their cell, he had a light brought in and carefully examined their fetters.

"No, we haven't broken your poor bits of iron," Blood said contemptuously. "I've a better plan in my head than that. Before the week is out, Master Lieutenant, you'll be tipping your hat to me when we meet in the street."

Having made sure that their fetters were in order, Sir John had them taken to the Tower stairs, where they were embarked on his private barge. Six muske-

teers, each with his weapon lying across his knees, accompanied them on their voyage up the river. The crowded boat attracted some little attention, but as Blood sat still and did nothing to advertise his presence, none of those who saw him realized who he was.

It was about two in the afternoon when they arrived at Whitehall and entered the great courtyard of the palace. This, to his alarm, Christopher saw to be filled with carriages, sedan chairs, footmen, and pages, in all the bustle and confusion of a great day at Court. It seemed that they were not only to be tried before the king, but that their trial was to be made a Court function—a gala day. Everyone appeared to know who they were; on all sides he heard laughter, saw shoulders shrugged, and fingers pointed at them.

"Oh, take us away!" he said imploringly to the lieutenant. "Hide us somewhere—in the guard room—some corner out of sight of these staring eyes."

Sir John did not reply, but Blood swung round on him with a growl.

"What's wrong with you?" he asked. "You'll have to stand before the king soon, so why be scared of these flunkies? Never mind them, man. They laugh now, but in an hour they'll be ready to drink your health."

After a brief delay, while the lieutenant spoke with one of the court ushers, they moved on again, and at length arrived in an empty anteroom, where for a time they were hidden from the eyes of the

curious. Leaving them there in the midst of their guard, Sir John went on to announce their arrival. He was absent for about ten minutes, and when he returned, he was accompanied by no less a person than the king's chamberlain. The latter ordered the prisoners to be led forward, and a few moments later Christopher found himself where of all places he most dreaded to be—in the presence of the king.

His Majesty was in the great banquet hall. A portion of the floor had been raised so as to form a dais, in the center of which was set the royal chair, a magnificent, gilded affair piled with cushions and draped with crimson velvet. The king lounged on it like a dark satyr, the swart harshness of his face greatly accentuated by the crimson background. Beside him, in the place where his wife should have been, sat Madam Carwell, his new French mistress; and standing in a semi-circle behind were other courtiers, their jewels and gorgeous raiment making a blaze of light and color. The galleries above were thronged with spectators, and the walls on either side were lined with soldiers of the royal bodyguard.

When they entered the room, there was a buzz of conversation, but at sight of the terrible Colonel Blood, alive and in the flesh, every tongue was stilled. Save for the sound of their own footfalls and the clank of their fetters, they walked up to the dais in utter silence. The fine ladies and gentlemen stared at them as at caged wild beasts, those behind standing on tiptoe and craning their necks to see.

Christopher cast one hunted glance round, and then fixed his eyes on the floor. Everyone was there; all had come to witness his shame. He saw the Duke of Buckingham behind the king's chair, and beside him my Lord Rochester; a little farther away stood the Duke of Ormond and his son Ossory, the former present at Court for the first time since Blood's attempt on his life.

Quite unabashed by the interest his appearance excited, the colonel stalked boldly forward, his head held high and his eyes darting sharp glances to right and left. Once they fell upon Ormond, and a contemptuous smile crossed his face; finally they came to rest on those of Buckingham, and stayed there, full of stern inquiry. The duke shuffled uneasily, looked round to make sure that he was not observed, and then gave a slight nod. Blood nodded also, and smiled again.

"Well, sirrah! What have you to say for yourself?" the king asked at last. "Odsfish!" he added over his shoulder, "see how stiff the rogue shows himself. He might be some Puritan saint come to judgment."

Blood inclined his head in a half-mocking reverence.

"Your Majesty shows a rare perspicacity," said he. "For though I cannot truthfully lay claim to being a saint, Puritan or otherwise, yet it is on behalf of such that I am come to intercede. For that reason, Sire, and no other, have I sought your ear today."

"How so?" Charles said in surprise. "I thought you

came to tell me why you should not be hanged for stealing my crown."

"Precisely, Sire—but you don't think I took your crown to wear it, or to enrich myself by selling the jewels? Believe me, I am not so petty. I did it in the hope of inducing Your Majesty to amend the error of your ways."

"The error of my ways?" the king said angrily. "This to me! Gad's life, man, you have the devil's own impudence!" Then his sense of humor got the better of him, and he laughed. "A worthy tutor, you, to teach a man how to amend his ways! And which of my faults is it that you would correct?"

"Your Majesty's treatment of the godly," Blood said, "your harshness to them over matters of conscience." A faint trace of a Puritanical snuffle appeared in his voice. "Think, Sire, how those poor folk live, whose only crime is that they would worship God after their own fashion. Their meetings are broken up, their houses invaded; they are hunted and harried like wild beasts. Your justices, Sire, are justices no longer. They are men of blood; the main duty of their office is revenge.

"Revenge is sweet—oh, I don't deny it! I am no Quaker, God knows, to sit and suffer and never strike a blow. But revenge, Sire, should be taken on the guilty. Of what use is it to fill your jails with poor, harmless men and women—ay, and little children too—and to leave them to rot and die there? Are they the guilty? Was it such as they with whom Cromwell

oppressed the land? Was it they who murdered your father?"

He paused dramatically, amidst a silence of profound astonishment. All that he had said was true, as everyone in the room knew full well. But the last person by whom they had expected to be called to account for it was Colonel Blood. Most surprised of all, perhaps, was the king. Never, probably, during the ten years that he had ruled the country had a man spoken to him thus. Gradually the silence gave way to a ripple of laughter.

"A new prophet has arisen," somebody said. "One that dares to beard a king—another Moses."

"Nay," Rochester corrected quickly, "not a Moses—an Aaron. Moses was weak of voice, they say, and this fellow can bawl loud enough. Spare him, Your Majesty! Spare his life, and give him to me for my soul's sake. I am in dire need of exhortation."

Christopher listened to all this in amazement. What Blood's purpose was in assuming the role of religious devotee he could not imagine. But no doubt he had some reason for it, and in the meantime, he was successfully obscuring the trail, turning his hearers' thoughts away from the stealing of the jewels. Already the temper of the assembly was changing. When the prisoners were brought in, the feeling had been definitely hostile to them, but now most of the courtiers were disposed to laugh. There were some who were not, however, and among them was the Earl of Ossory.

"Sire!" he cried, starting forward, "don't listen to the damnable villain. He is only trying to cloak his crimes beneath a semblance of piety."

"Not I!" Blood retorted. "That was what your father did when he hanged my kinfolk in Ireland."

"You hound! I marvel that you dare to mention his name. Wait! I'll have the truth out of you. Do you admit that it was you who attempted his life?"

"Admit it? To be sure I do!" Blood said fiercely. "My only regret is that I failed. Revenge is sweet, I say, and in this case it wouldn't have been the innocent who suffered."

Ossory ground his teeth. "By heaven, were we anywhere but here, monster, I'd hew you limb from limb!" he shouted.

"Bold words, bold words," the colonel said. "Trust an Ormond to be brave when he sees his enemy helpless." And he clanked his fetters. "Were we anywhere but here, my Lord, I'd take you by the scruff of the neck and drown you in a puddle."

A murmur went round the assembly, and Buckingham and several of those who were hostile to the Duke of Ormond laughed outright. Ossory, in desperation, turned to the king.

"Your Majesty!" he cried passionately, "grant me this one favor. Have this villain unchained, arm him, and let me face him sword in hand. Then, if I do not avenge my father's injuries upon his accursed body—"

"Nay, nay, Ossory," the king interposed. "We do

not doubt your courage. No man here does; it has been proved too often. But to release this swash-buckler that you may risk your life by fighting him would be folly, and I cannot allow it."

Ossory would have spoken again, but his father stepped forward and laid a hand on his arm. He whispered a few words into the young man's ear, and then led him back to his place.

"And you, sirrah!" the king went on, addressing Blood, "curb your insolent tongue, or I'll have it torn out of your head. What do you take this to be —a Whitefriars bawdy-house? Wait till I question you, and then speak—then only."

The colonel bowed and stood silent.

"Will you be pleased to explain," Charles asked him presently, "what your care for the souls of the godly has to do with the stealing of my crown?"

"It was intended for a warning," Blood said. "If the crown may be taken so easily, what of the head that wears it? I'd have you remember the fate of your father, Sire, and beware."

There was a perceptible pause before the king replied. This time he showed no resentment at the colonel's plain speaking. Once he glanced over his shoulder, looking in a peculiar manner at several of the gentlemen massed behind him.

"The fate of my father?" he said at last. "You talk in riddles, man. What do you mean? That there are plots against my person—against the realm?"

"Plots?" Blood laughed. "Why, the land is rife with

them, Sire. It needs but the turn of a hair to have the whole people about your ears, as your father did thirty years ago. I wonder in how many taverns men will drink tonight to a 'New Forty-one.' Your Majesty has never heard of the toast? No, I dare say not; my Lords of the Council will have kept it from you. And some of them have good reason to, I'll warrant."

"The man lies!" someone cried angrily. "Don't heed him, Your Majesty. He lies, thinking thus to save his skin."

It would have been better, perhaps, if that person had held his peace. His words carried no conviction, but only sounded a note of alarm. The king looked round to locate the speaker, and then faced the colonel with a bitter smile.

"I have no doubt that there are plots," he said. "But can you prove it, man—can you make good your words?"

"Ay, that I can!" Blood replied recklessly. "I was engaged in one myself. Last summer, it was, one day in August. Your Majesty was bathing in the river at Battersea, and I was there hidden among the reeds, with about a score of others. Every man of us had a carbine, and our purpose was to shoot you—riddle you with bullets as you came up out of the water. If you doubt me, Sire, go and look amongst the reeds. The platforms that we stood on are there still. Or ask these two," and he indicated Hunt and Parrett. "They were there also; their carbines were leveled at your heart, as mine was!"

He stopped again, making another dramatic climax. The result was a sensation; ejaculations of horror burst from everyone in the room. Madam Carwell covered her eyes with her hands and shrieked; most of the other ladies, as if duty bound, followed her example. The gentlemen dropped their hands to their sword hilts and stood swearing, irresolute, each waiting to see what the rest would do. The king alone preserved his composure. He tried to speak, but had to call for order three times before he could make his voice heard. Even then one of the young ladies-in-waiting was not silenced, but continued to scream until she was hustled out of the room.

"Good lack!" Charles said, when the door was closed behind her. "So you plotted to take my life, did you? But why, man? At whose instance? Who hired you to do the deed?"

"That, Sire, I can't tell you."

"You can't, eh? Do you mean that you won't?"

"I can't," Blood said. "I am bound by an oath. But I'll tell you this much: Your Majesty need not look far for the author of the enterprise." And he nodded towards the throng of courtiers.

The king drew in a long breath between his teeth.

"How is it that I am still alive?" he asked. "You are a good marksman, Colonel, so I have heard. Why didn't you shoot me?"

Then it was that Blood played his master-stroke. He chose to hesitate for a moment—to appear tongue-tied.

"Indeed, Sire, I hardly know. I think I must have been afraid. I've told myself a thousand times that there was nothing in this world that I feared, but when I had Your Majesty before the muzzle of my carbine—and saw your kingly person, Sire—I was struck with awe. I don't know why, but so it was. I couldn't have pulled the trigger to save my life. And I stopped the others, too—which was no easy matter, believe me. I was in as much danger then, knocking up the muzzles of those murderous zealots, as I am now of being hanged."

"So?" said the king, after a pause. "I owe you my life. That's your story, is it?"

"After such a story, surely all that remains is for Your Majesty to order him to the gallows," Ossory put in; but neither of the two principals in the drama paid any attention to him.

"Ay, you owe me your life, Sire," Blood said. "I saved you then, and today, thinking to warn you, I tried to take your crown. And in so doing—" he shook his head sadly—"I fear that I have brought Your Majesty into greater peril than ever."

"Greater peril? How so, man?"

"In that the law must take its course, Sire, and I must hang. For myself I care not; I have faced death every day for the last ten years, and it was bound to come sooner or later. But when I am gone—be careful, Sire; look well to your own safety."

"Why?"

"For this reason. I am one of a secret band of

conspirators, a thousand strong, and each one sworn to avenge the death of every other. I warn you, when I hang, Your Majesty will be in such danger as never before. Don't walk about unguarded, Sire, as you are accustomed to do now. It won't be a matter of twenty men this time. A thousand carbines will be laying in wait for you, a thousand daggers whetted to drink of your heart's blood. And I cannot help you; I cannot stay their vengeance. It is an oath, and the man that breaks it would think himself accursed."

"Lord sakes!" the king said. "You talk as though you were the lord of every fanatic in Christendom."

"I talk as Colonel Blood, Sire. *I am* Colonel Blood."

Such words, if spoken by ninety-nine men out of every hundred, would have evoked nothing but contemptuous mirth. But Blood was the hundredth man. He had the physique and personality to give his utterances the ring of truth, no matter how wild they might appear. There was not a courtier in the room but felt a sense of uneasiness steal over him, and few who did not look distrustfully at their neighbors. The colonel had been trying to sow the seeds of mutual distrust among them, and he had succeeded. As before, the king, though threatened more than any, remained calmest of all.

"What you mean is this," he said with a smile. "Your head is in the wolf's mouth, but you haven't been fool enough to put it there without taking due precaution."

"I mean, Sire, that it would serve you best to

temper your justice with mercy. Seek to conciliate, not to arouse hatred. These zealots are not as you think, Sire; they are men even as you are, with hearts like your own. If only the dew of your mercy were shed on them, you would reap a golden harvest of gratitude."

Charles laughed rather bitterly. Half his life was spent in conciliating, in promising this and that, and in playing off one person or party against another. He fell silent for a while, thinking. When he looked up his eye fell on Christopher. Hitherto that young man had got off lightly. Blood had so dominated the proceedings that nobody had addressed a word to him. Now, however, he was called upon to play his part in the game.

"Surely," the king said, "I have seen that young man before. Who is he?"

There was a brief silence, and then the Duke of Ormond spoke.

"His name is Hallam, Sire—one of my own men. It was he who saved my life when Blood attacked me. How he comes to be here today I cannot imagine."

"Hallam? Ay, I remember. . . . Well, sir, and why do we find you in this company? Are you also concerned with the saving of the godly?"

"No, Sire," Christopher replied hesitatingly, "I—I was with this man—but I had no part in his plot."

"Oh, hadn't you? What do you say, Master Blood? Is this young man one of your sworn brotherhood?"

For once in a way the colonel saw fit to speak the

truth. Having uttered his threats, he perhaps now felt that the time was ripe for a display of magnanimity.

"It is as Mr. Hallam says. He has no more to do with my attempt on the crown than Your Majesty's self. Spare him, Sire. He went there unwittingly—I deceived him. Deal with the rest of us as you will, but I swear to you that this young man was innocent even of the thought of wrong."

"Then how does he come to be with you?" the king asked. "What mystery is this?"

Sorely against his will, Christopher was compelled to tell his story. And this time there was no keeping Nancy's name out of it; Blood would have none of that. He supplied all the details that Christopher left out, to the king's great amusement.

"If it was for the sake of a lady's bright eyes that you went there, why, that we can readily forgive. Eh, Rochester?"

"Most readily, Sire," said the gentleman appealed to. "Indeed, I can compliment Mr. Hallam upon his good taste. Her eyes are uncommonly bright—I've seen them myself."

"If it please you, Sire," Sir John Robinson put in, "Mr. Edwards, the son of the keeper of the jewels, is waiting outside, in case Your Majesty should wish to see him."

Young Edwards was admitted, and he too told his story. Since the prisoners' arrest he had had time to talk matters over with his sister, and while he made

out a very black case against Blood, he no longer considered Christopher a party to the robbery. What he said, indeed, went far to exonerate that young man from blame.

"H'm!" said the king, when he had heard all. "Your father will get better of his hurts, you say. We must see that he is not the loser by his faithfulness. A hundred pounds shall be paid to him out of my privy purse; or if it doesn't contain so much—as is likely enough, God knows—the Treasurer shall pay it." He paused a moment, and then rose and faced the assembly. "Well, my Lords, what is your opinion? Are the prisoners guilty, or not guilty? To hang, or not to hang?"

For a while nobody spoke. The prisoners were so obviously guilty—or three of them, at all events—that it was hardly possible to assert the contrary. On the other hand, the thousand carbines and daggers of which Blood had spoken postulated thought—much thought. If they adjudged him guilty, the owners of the carbines and daggers might form a similar judgment with regard to them. Presently, Buckingham took it upon himself to put his feeling into words.

"If Your Majesty is to be everlastingly exposed to the risk of assassination," he said, "it is a matter to be looked into. Your life is precious to us all, and no man or woman here present would willingly have it endangered. I, for one, would go to any lengths to avoid such a thing. If the only alternative is the prisoners' release, then, for heaven's sake, pardon

them, I say, and let them go." There was a stifled exclamation from Ossory, and he paused to look haughtily round. "That they are guilty is beyond question," he went on. "But that is a small matter, and beside the point. The thing at issue is Your Majesty's safety. And my considered advice to you, Sire, which I presume to offer as a member of your council, is that you show them mercy."

Following his lead, others spoke. Nearly all were in favor of showing mercy to Christopher, but there was no such unanimity about the rest of the prisoners. The supporters of the Duke of Ormond pleaded earnestly for Blood to be hanged, cost what it might.

When all had had their say, the king pondered for a while. Probably his mind was made up already—nay, probably it had been made up before he asked the gentlemen's opinion. He was always prone to take the line of least resistance, and there was no doubt in which direction it pointed on this occasion. But for form's sake, he affected to weigh the advice that had been given him.

"The consensus of opinion is in favor of mercy, I think," he said at last. "I have not counted heads, my Lords, but so it appeared to me. And on my word, I am inclined to agree with you. The chief of the prisoners, this Colonel Blood, is no common rogue, but a man of parts. If we could enlist him in our service, much good might come of it. Yes, since his offense was special to myself, since I and my servants alone suffered wrong, and—er—since the man claims

to have saved my life, I would fain exercise my prerogative of pardon. That thereby, perhaps—”

“What?” Ossory cried. “You will pardon this man—a thief, a murderer, the blackest villain that ever stepped out of hell? Did I hear Your Majesty aright?”

“I said so,” the king replied coldly. “How, my Lord—do you question my right? . . . And understand this also: that as I am forgiving, so do I expect you and your noble father to be.”

Ossory turned almost livid. He tried to speak, but words failed him; not a sound escaped his lips. Presently the Duke of Ormond stepped forward.

“If Your Majesty sees fit to pardon the man for his attempt on the crown, I have no choice but to forgive him his attack on my poor life,” he said.

There followed an awkward pause. The thing was so outrageous, so glaring a travesty of justice, that even Buckingham looked shamefaced, and ostentatiously busied himself with arranging the folds of his cloak. To relieve the tension, the king turned to Blood again.

“You hear, sirrah? His Grace grants you his forgiveness. You, for your part, must be as forbearing with him. What’s your quarrel with him?”

“Under color of religion, Sire, he persecuted my friends in Ireland, hanging several and driving others into exile. I was myself dispossessed of my lands, and have ever since been a fugitive fleeing from his vengeance.”

"Religion again!" Charles said bitterly. "This worship of God, which should be a blessing to us, is in these days more of a curse. And how about your friends of the carbines and daggers, sir? We shall expect some return for our clemency."

"Your Majesty need have no fear," Blood responded glibly. "Henceforth my life shall be devoted to your service. As for the others I spoke of, your mercy will touch their hearts, and they will no longer threaten, but protect you."

"Very good," the king said. "In consideration of the service you offer, we make you a full pardon for all your past offenses, and restore to you your life. As regards the estate you forfeited, that it may be impossible to restore, but its loss shall be made good."

"Your Majesty extends your gracious mercy to all of us?" Blood queried. "Not to myself alone, but to these others whom my mistaken zeal has brought under your displeasure?"

"To them also," the king agreed. Then, no doubt feeling that the farce had gone on long enough, he turned to the Lieutenant of the Tower. "Sir John, we charge you with the custody of the prisoners until their pardons can be arranged. See to it that they are well looked after. This one—" he indicated Christopher—"may be set free at once. Hallam, you rogue, are there not beauties enough about the town, that you must needs go hunting in the Tower for them? . . . Ha, you are a sad rake, I fear."

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## EIGHTEEN

### *To Christopher His Own*

CHRISTOPHER walked out of the presence-chamber feeling like a man in a dream. He knew nothing of Blood's underground influence, or of the various intrigues by which his escape had been effected. He only saw what was on the surface, and it seemed to him that all the world must have gone mad. It was a fortunate kind of madness for him, no doubt, and he supposed that he ought to be thankful for it. But he knew no true inward satisfaction, not even when his irons were taken off and he was a free man again. The gross miscarriage of justice that he had seen had destroyed forever his faith in kingship.

The affair had been more like a stage play, an elaborate masque, than an event in real life. King, lords, and ladies had all played their appropriate parts—mouthing high-sounding phrases, tendered sage advice, shrieked and vaped—and in the middle of them, directing operations as though to the manner born, had been Blood, the inevitable, ineluctable Blood. One man only had broken the rules of the game by saying what he really thought—my Lord Ossory—and he had been remorselessly snubbed. Such was the King of England's royal justice.

Christopher had little time for reflection, however. He was no sooner free from his bonds than the people in the palace courtyard crowded round him, all anxious to hear his story. It was as Blood had foretold: those who had laughed at him an hour ago were now ready to drink his health. The fact of his having gone to the Tower for the sake of a woman rather added to his glory than otherwise. It was fashionable to commit all kinds of follies for women, and most of those who toasted him were envious of his notoriety. Their interest in Nancy was unbounded; whatever befell her in the future, she bade fair to suffer from no lack of admirers.

As soon as he could, Christopher made his escape. The thought of Nancy turned his heart sick. He had heard the story her brother told at the trial—how Blood and his fellows had set upon her father in the jewel room and well nigh done him to death. And, indirectly, all that had happened through him. He must go to her, try to help her, make what amends he could. She would probably turn from him with loathing, but his plain duty was to go.

He went, but at the gate of the Tower he was stopped. By the lieutenant's orders, he was told, no strangers were to be admitted. He begged the warders to take him a message to Nancy, but in vain. They recognized him as one of the participants in the affray of the jewels, and whatever might be the feeling in Whitehall towards Colonel Blood and his friends, that in the Tower was decidedly hostile.

On the morrow he went there again, and again was disappointed. The warders had reported his previous coming to Sir John Robinson, who had given orders that he was not to be admitted on any account, either then or later. Christopher raged and implored, but all to no purpose. The warders laughed at him. Was it likely that they were going to let him in to be at his damnable games again? Never, while the Tower stood, should he set his nose inside it!

He went back to his lodging in despair, and there, to his surprise, he found my Lord Ossory awaiting him. He had not dared to go to Clarendon House since the day of the trial. After what had happened, he supposed that Ormond and his son would want no more of him. The young nobleman greeted him, however, with a smile.

"Why haven't you been round to see us, Hallam? You're still in my father's service, eh? I've never heard of your resigning from it."

"Well, my Lord," Christopher said hesitatingly, "I—er—after I'd been proved to be hand in glove with Blood, I scarcely dared to hope—"

"Tush, man, never mind that! He deceived you, and everybody knows it. And you needn't be ashamed of it, either. He'd deceive the devil himself, that man. Look how he made all those fools believe in his stories of plots the other day. There wasn't a word of truth in them, I'll be bound."

"No, perhaps not," Christopher said lugubriously. "Tomorrow, then, you must come to Clarendon

House again. Don't hesitate, man! My father wishes you to come. He hasn't forgotten that you saved his life. . . . Oh, and that reminds me; I have a letter for you. It was handed in at the door this morning. I don't know who brought it, but here it is."

Christopher expressed his gratitude and promised to go to Clarendon House on the morrow. He did not quite see what there could be for him to do there now that Blood had received a free pardon; indeed, he more than half suspected that the duke was continuing his employment from motives of charity or kindness of heart. He said nothing about it, however; and when, after his visitor's departure, he settled down to read his letter, what he found written there speedily made him forget all else.

The letter was from Mr. Mander, the Sheffield lawyer, and seemed to have been sent by arrangement with his half-brother. In it, Christopher was urged to return home at once. Matters at Fulwood were going from bad to worse. Robert was dying and the place was falling into rack and ruin for want of someone to look after it.

He read the letter through twice, and then put it aside and thought. What was he to do? If he returned to far-off Yorkshire the chances were that he would never see Nancy again. At best, he would be away for several weeks, and it was unthinkable that he should leave her without a word of farewell or explanation. But how was he to get any such word to her? That also might take weeks, and in the mean-

time Robert would probably die. What *was* he to do?

As it happened, his difficulty was solved for him, and that very day. Half an hour later, tired of sitting in his room, he went outdoors again. And there, as he wandered disconsolately down Fleet Street, he met no less a person than Colonel Blood. Having no longer any need to conceal himself, that worthy was dressed in the height of fashion, with a coat as well cut and a peruke as glossy as those of his friend Buckingham. He made a fine figure in his new clothes, too, his great height and broad shoulders setting them off to a nicety. He greeted Christopher in the manner of a long-lost friend, and when the latter refused the hand he held out, patted him familiarly on the shoulder.

"Nay, lad, never bear malice," said he. "Let by-gones be bygones, and shake hands on it I treated you badly, maybe, but you're none the worse for it. I saved your neck for you, and now you're a famous man. So am I famous—ho, ho! I'm forever closeted with His Majesty's council, thinking out plots and ways of suppressing them. It's all very well, but a cursed strain on the imagination. I have to disclose a new plot every day; no less will suffice them. And they have to be nicely balanced, too, between Puritans and Papists, to keep the gentlemen gnashing their teeth at one another. However, they'll tire of it soon, and in the meantime the high world is beginning to notice me. Tomorrow I dine with the Lord Treasurer."

"It will be an honor for him," Christopher said, shaking off the man's arm.

Blood looked at him curiously for a moment.

"Why, what's amiss with you?" he asked. "You've a face as long as a fiddle. It's never that lass in the Tower you're worrying about? Haven't you made your peace with her yet?"

"No, I have not," Christopher replied. "Nor am I likely to, since I'm denied admission to the Tower." It seemed almost sacrilege to discuss Nancy with this man, but he could not resist saying so much.

"What the devil?" the colonel cried. "They won't let you into the Tower? By heaven, that shall be altered! Haven't we got the king's pardon? Old Robinson shall let you in—or me in, or any of us in—or I'll soon have him up to answer for it. See here, you wait a day or two—until Friday, say—and then go there again. If they don't let you through the gate, come back and tell me. I'm to be found any day about Whitehall."

Christopher inclined his head and said nothing. He had no faith at all in Blood's promises; he had heard too many of them before. The colonel turned away from him and glanced up the road.

"Ha, see there!" he said suddenly. "As I live, there's his Grace of Ormond riding in his carriage—the very one I took him out of! Watch now! I'll have to stop the carriage in the middle of the road. Good-day to you, lad. Be sure to go to the Tower on Friday."

He swaggered off to meet the carriage. Christopher

did not wait to see what happened, but walked away in disgust. The last thing he wanted was for Ormond to see him in company with Colonel Blood. And yet, much though he disliked the man, there was something about Blood that won his unwilling admiration. Who but he, if taken in the act of stealing a crown, could have won for himself a free pardon on the same day? Who but he could have imposed his will upon a king and his whole Court? And Christopher, knowing these things, could not help admiring him, with a young man's admiration for the reckless and strong.

It was his belief in Blood's power, perhaps—the knowledge that the man *could* help him, if he would—that made him go to the Tower on Friday morning. And he was not so surprised as he might have been when he found that the colonel had been as good as his word. Or if not that, at any rate something had happened, for this time he was admitted without demur. The warders glowered at him, indeed, but they answered him civilly when he spoke to them.

His easy passage of the gate gave him a sort of false confidence, but it deserted him when he reached the Martin Tower. Before ringing the handbell at the foot of the stairs, he hesitated long. How if Nancy refused to see him, or her brother drove him off at sword's point? As it happened, his ring was answered by neither of them, but by an old serving woman whom he had never seen before.

"Is Mr. Edwards within—young Mr. Edwards?"

Christopher said. It was no good asking for the father, for he would still be in bed recovering from his hurts.

The old woman seemed to be deaf, and he had to repeat the question three times before he received an answer. Then he was told that young Edwards was not at home. Neither, it appeared, was his mother; both were out in the city.

"Is Mistress Nancy in, then?" Christopher shouted.

The woman nodded, and led the way upstairs and into a small sitting room. There he was left alone for a few minutes, to wait in breathless anxiety. A new idea had come to him, something fresh to worry over. Would Nancy's appearance be changed by all that she had gone through? Would her hair be gray, her cheeks sunken, and her eyes filled with the light of tragedy? He had heard of such things—of people whose hair turned white in a single day.

When at last she appeared he gave a gasp of relief. She was as beautiful as ever! There was something in her face, perhaps—a shade of expression—that had not been there before, and she might have been a little paler than of old. But that was all; and the pallor, at any rate, was not apparent when she greeted him. While Christopher gazed at her, she also looked at him, and presently she smiled. She had wondered why he had been so long in coming, but it was not because he did not wish to see her, and that was all that mattered.

"Well, Christopher," she said quietly. "You asked for me."

"I have come to make my apologies, and to ask after Mr. Edwards' health," he said awkwardly. "Is he still in bed?"

Nancy told him of her father. He was still in bed, but would be out and about again in a few days. Everyone in the Tower had been unboundedly kind to him; my Lady Robinson had helped to nurse him, and Sir John himself had come to see him two or three times a day.

"And to think," Christopher groaned, "that I was the cause of it all. Nancy—oh, my dear, you know that I acted in good faith. I had no idea that the man was other than he seemed. I never suspected that—"

"Yes, yes, I know," she said. "We all know it, even my father. He doesn't blame you now. But—oh, Christopher, that dreadful man!" She gave a little shiver. "I knew he was false. I knew it every time I heard his voice. But he talked so smoothly; he seemed so helpful—However, it doesn't matter. It's all over now. He will work no more evil here, even though the king has pardoned him. Christopher, why *was* he pardoned? That, to my father, has been harder to bear than any of his wounds."

She shuddered again, and fell silent. Christopher also was silent, reflecting on Blood's triumphant villainy and the marvelous way in which things had turned out. Presently Nancy's voice interrupted him.

"I think I ought to go," she said. "My mother is out, and I should be with my father."

Christopher looked at her, nervously fingering the

hilt of his sword. She did not meet his eyes, but glanced towards the door. She wanted to be rid of him, he thought; all her concern was for her father.

"You will assure him of my sorrow," he said, "and tell him that I shall trouble him no more. I shall be leaving London soon, to go home to Yorkshire. My brother is dying."

"Oh," Nancy said in a curious voice, "is he, sir? I am sorry. Still, it means that you—"

She did not finish the sentence. It meant that he would be a rich man, the lord of an estate, but she did not feel inclined to tell him so. Christopher tried to see her face, but she kept it hidden from him. She would give him no help; if he wanted her, he must ask.

"Nancy," he said tremulously, "I—I—my darling, I want you to come with me—to marry me."

They came close together—how, he knew not—and her face, all alright, was before his own.

"Christopher," she whispered, "you really mean it? Remember, I am a—"

"Really mean it? Darling, I love you—I adore you! I have been in agony these last few days. They wouldn't let me into the Tower, and I thought I should never see you again." He caught her in his arms. "Nancy—my beautiful—"

She lifted up her lips to his.

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